

Wahyu dah kurang: Journalism Practice Among Journalists in Malaysian Mainstream Media Agencies during Pakatan Harapan Tenure

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Abstract

The change of government after the election upset in the Malaysian General Election 2018 placed the former government-affiliated media in a tricky situation. The conflict of interest in serving the Pakatan Harapan coalition as their government while UMNO was still their biggest shareholder has put some of the mainstream media agencies in Malaysia in an awkward situation. The change of government in 2018 promised a freer press by the returning prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the same premier who approved a major media crackdown called Ops Lalang in 1987 that led to the detainment of many journalists and editors at that time, limiting press freedom. Ever since then, the spectre of Ops Lalang still lives in media houses curbing journalism practice among media practitioners to self-censor their writings. For this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with journalists of mainstream media from Utusan Malaysia, Kosmo, Berita Harian, Harian Metro, and New Straits Times to understand if the change of government had impacted their journalism practice. Findings revealed that while they may have more freedom to write news from a neutral perspective ever since the new government took over, journalists feel that they were mandated to serve the government of the day.

Keywords: *14th General Election, Mainstream Media, Self-censorship, UMNO, Pakatan Harapan.*

1.0 Introduction

It has been known that news stories' religious consumption is very primitive and fundamental in human society [1]. News provided vital information that is an essential part of human socialization that influences how people see the world they live in [2]. Consumers then filter this information by generating interpretive schemas and creating frameworks to understand or make sense of what it means. Journalists would select and emphasize some aspects of social knowledge by adding colours or "frames" into the information [2]. This means that news is moulded to represent some perceived realities to form the understanding of an event [3]. Telling the truth is one of the many principles taught in journalism school, but their truths were often held to which organizations they had sided [4]. Another principle of journalism would be that journalism should act as an independent power monitor or as is commonly understood, the authorities' watchdog [5]. A journalist's work shall provide the authorities with an insight into the current trend of a particular period. It should remain interesting and relevant to the needs of society [4].

Professional journalists' core values in delivering facts accurately and fairly are as important as their ability to gather facts and report them [6]. Traditional mass media was created to provide news to broad audiences competing with niche sources that narrowcast to discrete users [7]. Traditional media consisting of established news institutions that existed long before the Internet, such as newspapers, radio segments, and television news programs, coexist with new media that are the outgrowing technological innovation [8]. Akar and Topcu [9] state that journalism is primarily aimed at i) disseminating information to its readers and viewers (ii) understanding events that, at most, are focused on the culture and beliefs held by a specific geographical perimeter society; (iii) serving as a watchdog of power; (iv) promoting and reforming or campaigning for certain causes; (v) informing and inspiring the public vi) to direct and/or serve the state's public interest [10]. Such aims form a continuum of shifts in social activism between factual reporting and interpretive interpretation. Human beings are often critical in evaluating events and forming some interpretation of what is happening (ibid). In an attempt to remain relevant to readers' interest, journalists will write based on trending social media issues rather than traditional journalism, such as obtaining information from official sources [11].

Weiss [12] also mentioned that the ideal aims of a democratic process seem to be in limbo within the new media era as the masses and the media disseminate a large amount of political content. However, much of the material is unreliable, doubtful, and polarizing. Graham [13] posited that journalists are trained to be watchdogs in a democratic society would typically, under the best of circumstances, focused on unearthing the facts surrounding significant political transgressions and not merely for trolling purposes. The new media creates a complex arena, as the available content became more diverse. Information distributed online now runs the gamut from truth-oriented, investigative reporting from professional journalists to rubbish fabrications using the term coined by President Trump's advisor Kellyanne Conway written by the alternative press [13]. The boundaries that distinguish these disparate news types become more and more muddled with the rise of new media. Gatekeepers and editors regulating the flow of information by applying news principles and standards associated with the public good have become scarce [14]. These professions have now been replaced by social media and analytics editors who are tasked to draw users to their content regardless of the news value.

The shift in the quantity and quality of political information has allowed content to propagate seemingly without limits through technological advancement [8]. Journalists would not have much say when commercial pressures lead the media organisation they are working for to feature incendiary stories that receive most recognition by the public. Tapsell [15] said that there was an increased mobilisation of political supporters involved in a "cyberwar" using "cybertroopers," fake Twitter accounts, deliberate misinformation, and increased paid mobilisation of online participants for direct political causes. Owen [8] said that politicians from both sides of the divide seem to take advantage of this freedom, using cybertroopers to do the dirty job for them backbiting one another. However, UMNO established a cybertrooping unit specifically to blast out information about their then government and party policy, engaging themselves in cyber warfare [16]. By doing so, UMNO successfully created a convenient degree of plausible deniability, giving the perception that UMNO distant itself from activities that are not officially condoned [16] [17].

2.0 Background of the study

In Malaysia, the public has the understanding that all mainstream media area government-owned [18]. This is because control over mainstream media in Malaysia often falls into the hands of some component parties within Barisan Nasional (BN) or their economic allies [19]. For this reason, the ruling coalition ran several public-listed media companies by acquiring massive shares of ownership [20]. The need to understand the relationship between media and politics has never become more pressing than today as media play an essential role in feeding the public sphere with information [21].

There are many traditional mainstream media in Malaysia, such as Utusan Malaysia, Berita Harian, New Straits Times, The Star, TV1, TV2 and TV3, to name a few. In this paper, for this study, the term “traditional media” only refers to mainstream newspaper companies that have or had an affiliation to BN component parties like The Star, New Straits Times, Berita Harian, Harian Metro, Utusan Malaysia and Kosmo. Internally, it is claimed that the untouchable parochial politics of BN construct the code of conduct of journalists in Malaysia’s traditional media industry for the last 61 years until its downfall in the 14th General Election in 2018 [20]. Traditional media journalists, whether they realise or not, are used as government mouthpieces through the institutions they represent [20] and consequently become agents of propaganda where the government can limit or run publications to intimidate political dissidents. Research done by the Electoral Integrity Project concluded that lack of media space in allowing a fair and balanced election for all parties was the key element to the loss of the then opposition, Pakatan Rakyat (PH) in the 2013 General Election [22].

After 61 years of staying in power, Malaysia's 14th General Election quickly toppled the BN-led government. It was dubbed as "the mother of all elections" and "the most dramatic political shifts in its history" [23]. PH historically secured 113 Parliamentary seats under its coalition of four parties led former prime minister, Tun Mahathir Mohammad. UMNO seemed to be relinquishing its influence in the local media when it monetised most of its shares in Media Prima Berhad and Utusan Melayu through Gabungan Kesturi Sdn. Bhd. and Altima Inc. to business tycoon Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary [24]. The businessman is said to be a new media mogul as it is believed that he is the second-largest shareholder in Utusan Melayu and the owner of The Malaysian Reserve [25]. The transfer of shares between media giants could also affect journalists' code of conduct as they now have new owners to please who comes with new sets of customs and practices.

Historically, traditional mainstream media have always shown government leaders as having a naturalized affinity with the public in terms of socioeconomic aspirations and goal. Weiss [12] viewed Malaysia as a semi-authoritarian state stating that the country’s traditional mainstream media are used as an ideological tool of the authorities to utilize particularly where the country’s hegemony seems to be compromised. They are a vital ideological apparatus in assisting the state’s hegemonic influence over society. Gramsci [26] opined that one would need to build a hegemony in order to gain and retain political power whereby masses need to naturally accept the dominant group(s) leadership, practices, discourses, and moral codes. Sani [27] said in Malaysia, the opposition parties’ ideas and statements on current affairs relating political, economic, and cultural issues are not often published by the media to the people. On the contrary, when the media do provide coverage to the opposition political parties, it is typically shed in a bad light [28]. Traditional mainstream media are usually very centralized, in need of large investment and resources as well as used as a state apparatus during the election, being influenced by governments through multiple mechanisms and forms of control [29].

Fong and Sidin [30] said that different mainstream newspapers would select and report on the same issue differently; this approach reflects their ideological, political and economic boundaries to which journalists operate within. Journalists would not have much say when commercial pressures lead the media organisation they are working for to feature incendiary stories most recognized by the public [8]. Furthermore, while platforms continue to make a profit, similar content is dispersed widely to other platforms as media power is focused on a small number of old and new media corporations (McChesney, 2016). The intimate connection between business and politics has always been the nature of Malaysian journalism [20] [31]. Jeniri [32] stated that such practice has directly impacted how media practitioners set their agendas, policies and the framing of certain news issues. Apart from education, the media help to build consent, legitimacy, and support for group interests [26]. The media are expected to play several essential roles in a democratic society. However, the ideal aims of a democratic process seem to be in limbo in the new media era as the masses, and the media disseminate a large amount of political content. Much of the material is unreliable, doubtful, and polarizing [12]. This warm relationship encouraged media to be compliant to the government by only lauding the latter’s economic directions while straying from injecting even genuine and constructive criticism on the country’s developmental policies and projects. Adnan and Kamaliah [33] stated that the political affiliation between traditional mainstream media and BN was hard

to break and emphasis was not be given on views that go against the ruling government, inevitably sidelined in the public arena.

In 1987 and some years that follow, the existence of stringent media-related laws that do not clearly place online journalism as a “freer medium” as compared to the mainstream mass media, explained the situation. Some 106 individuals have been sent to detention without trial under Ops Lalang’s major crackdown by the government ostensibly to prevent racial tension due to parties playing up “sensitive issues” [27] [34]. Jalli [14] argued that media practitioners worked under close monitoring by the federal government with little freedom. Nevertheless, new technology began to change the scenario, particularly the internet. When Dr Mahathir Mohamad, then Prime Minister, launched the Malaysian Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in 1996, he said there would be no Internet censorship [35]. The emergence of online newspaper in Malaysia started in 1995 with The Star Online and the New Straits Times Online being the pioneers of online journalism in the country, but they failed to function effectively as a tool of democracy and national integration [36]. News portals came to the fore with Malaysiakini.com leading the way, taking advantage of the no-censorship guarantee. Less than a year after the arrest of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, two friends, Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran developed a news portal called, Malaysiakini. The new alternative news site was aimed at providing critical reports on Malaysian politics in particular while Anwar was virtually crucified by the mainstream media [28].

Until GE14, many have observed and alleged that important institutions in Malaysia, such as the Election Commission, the chambers of the Attorney General, the Judiciary, and the mainstream media, were compromised by decades of authoritarian rule. Through legal and economic measures, the Barisan Nasional (BN) regime had a virtual stranglehold over the mainstream media, even before Najib took power [37]. Jalli [38] stated that the government controls the media primarily in two ways: The Ownership Act and the Printing Press Act, which allows newspapers to renew their licenses annually. In the past, major newspapers were all owned or controlled by their connections by the ruling party BN. Until today, the spectre of Ops Lalang still lives among journalists and editors who fear sudden suspension or revocation of publication [34]. Despite the platform and time, self-censorship remained as the most efficient mechanism for controlling media content [39].

Jeniri [32] seconded Shriver’s notion stating that newspaper ownerships in Malaysia cannot be detached from the usual business and political people who usually have links with political leaders and groups. Jalli [14] agreed with Jeniri, stating that the concentration of press ownership in Malaysia lies in the hands of a few who are closely associated or friendly to the government. Okwuchukwu [40] mentioned that media owners expect their workers to protect their political and/or economic interest tailored to their strategy to relate to the government of the day. Self-censorship can affect not just political news but also social, economic, cultural and religious issues. However, some journalists feel that they possess more individual freedom in moulding the content on social problems than their political counterparts. Skjerdal [41] stated that active self-censorship happens when journalists withhold information already gathered because publishing could lead to unwanted tensions where else passive self-censorship, on the other hand, occurs when the journalist or the desk decides not to cover an issue, to begin with.

3.0 Methodology

We had decided to conduct a qualitative study on this topic by obtaining relevant first-hand experience from informants, who in our view are experts in their fields and are qualified to provide information related to the study [42]. Qualitative researchers are interested in exploring the meaning people construct and how people make sense of the world. However, this process will make qualitative data bigger and difficult to manage. Interviews serve as a commonly used way to record the experiences and opinions of journalists. In this research, the richness of the data provided by qualitative interviews was necessary to explore the change in journalism practice among mainstream media journalist post-2018 Malaysian General Election. The qualitative in-depth interview research was also explicitly employed to examine any evidence of unbalanced news flow in journalist’s coverage post GE14. This method helped to identify if a change in

government and media owners affected journalists' work practice. The idea of this research was extracted from the rising perception Malaysians have towards all mainstream news outlet of government's mouthpieces. Due to the change of government in 2018, the prediction that mainstream media owned by the previous government would shut down was a concern among many, including investors, the public, and media stakeholders.

We believed that purposive sampling would be the most suitable sampling method for this exploratory research. Patton [43] believed that the strength and power of quality sampling depend on the cases with valuable information for in-depth study. As mentioned earlier, the participants involved come from a background that suits this study who are mainstream media journalists who have experienced working during the rule of BN and PH, respectively. Eight (8) participants from five media organisations were chosen in order to fulfil the requirement of the study. Besides, it would also provide the us with various answers as each participant holds a different opinion. The informants for this research were selected based on pre-determined criteria:

1. Malaysian
2. Journalist
3. He/she is working with either Kumpulan Utusan Melayu or the New Straits Times Press and have worked in the same company before Malaysia's 14th General Election until the time of the interview.

Data analysis was done by segregating the themes of informant's answers into groups of relevant topics. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to allow full immersion of the material and important remarks made by interviewees were jotted down. We used thematic coding to analyse the transcribed interviews. This method consisted of capturing themes or patterned responses in a systematic way [44]. The analysis was carried out using the software *Atlast.ti 8*.

TABLE 1

Professional background of the interviewees

Kumpulan Utusan Melayu (M) Berhad	New Straits Times Press Berhad
Four journalists from Utusan Malaysia One journalist from Kosmo	Two journalists from the New Straits Times One journalist from Berita Harian One journalist from Harian Metro

4.0 Findings

Several notable commonalities emerged in the analysis of journalism practice among journalists from mainstream media post-Malaysia's 2018 General Election.

4.1 Gratitude towards UMNO (*Jasa*)

All eight (8) participants were asked if their self-censorship has anything to do with their gratitude towards UMNO, who was the government for 61 years as well as their main shareholders. The purpose of this question is to explore if the former government can influence current journalism among mainstream media journalists. Five informants felt that the self-censorship style portrayed in their news-writing was influenced by the feeling of gratitude towards UMNO. Informant1, Informant2, Informant3, Informant5, Informant6 and Informant8 believed that unlike before the 14th General Election, the mainstream media was expected to criticize the then opposition, Pakatan Harapan and not highlight their good initiatives.

Informant1 agreed that the feeling of indebtedness towards UMNO leads to the almost neutral tone in writing about the said party.

“*Yeah* so reporting-wise, well the culture is not that big difference. Because we still want to take care of the relationship with the previous government and politician *kan*. We don’t really strongly condemn them politicians from UMNO or Barisan Nasional. At the same time, we try to play safe, try to play neutral. This new approach only took place after the change of government.” Informant 1

Informant 2 also supported Informant1’s statement by saying,

“I feel that is the feeling of indebtedness towards UMNO as their past leaders used to take care of these people. I feel that this was the reason why the media do not bash them. UMNO no longer has a large share in the mainstream media so the media could put them in a bad light if they wanted to. So, I really do feel this is because of their feeling of gratitude.” Informant 2

Informant 8 also shared the same sentiment with Informant 1, Informant 2, Informant 3 and Informant 6 saying that,

“Of course, there is a change. We do write about the previous government, but without showing hatred nor support. Like Najib’s case in court, for instance, our writing was not too harsh on him, but we did not persuade people to hate on Najib either. We only reported that Najib had been charged and that’s it. No insults nor support.” Informant 8

However, Informant 7 feels that the feeling of indebtedness will only land journalists, and their industry in limbo, he said,

“It limits the long-term development of journalism, as well as reduces the survival rate of that particular agency, which ultimately leading to its bankruptcy. Mainstream media agencies should be more objective in reporting news and should not side to any parties, although they are owned or funded by any politicians or political parties.” Informant 7

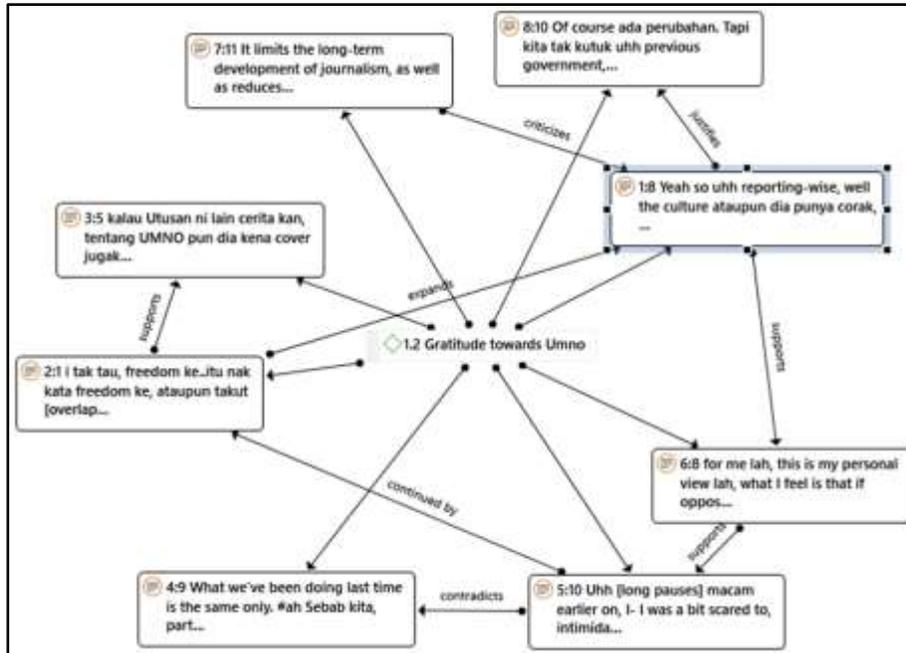


Figure 1. Network analysis on 'jasa' UMNO

4.2 "Wahyu" (Revelation)

All eight (8) participants were also asked if new shareholders have impacted content creation by giving specific stories to pursue. The term "Wahyu", which loosely translates as Revelation, is widely used among the journalism community about receiving direct orders from "up above" to pursue a story. However, it has no news-value as well as not relating to current issues. The purpose of this question is to study if such practice still takes place under the new major shareholder.

Informant1, Informant2, Informant5 agreed that ever since the company they worked received a new major shareholder, they have not received a single Wahyu during their tenure. All assignments given were seen as appropriate for coverage at the time. Informant 1 said while such a culture was only practised when UMNO had significant shares in the company, as quoted,

"We were previously owned by UMNO party, since they were once the biggest shareholders of the company, any event, related to the previous government should be covered. Should be covered. MCMU, Must Cover Must Use. In the past, we had to cover all these nonsensical assignments like a fishing event just because our editors were close to a minister or a Parliamentarian. Now we no longer do that." Informant 1

Informant 2 supported Informant 1, stating that they are more liberated ever since UMNO became the minority shareholder in the company he is working for.

"Not to say truly free per se, but now we no longer have the gatekeeper who brings down nonsensical wahyu. We no longer have that. I'm not sure about whether or not we can call that free media." Informant 2

Informant 5 supported Informant1 and Informant2 stating that wahyu was a thing in the past, as quoted,

"Yeah. Back then it was like [laughs] it was MCMU [laughs] yeah we had that "Must Cover Must Use", last year was like crazy lah. MCMU on like UMNO's thing, the bosses' friends. I mean we

have now, but it's more of a, it's not-No, I don't. We don't; we don't do that now. I think so. We have *uhh* proper advertorials from proper companies.

Informant 3 said there had been a decline in 'Must Cover Must Use' stories, the practice is far from dead.

Informant 3 mentioned,

"We still get *wahyu*, but it is far less now as compared to before. If our writings do not suit their taste, people from the government, they will call our bosses and tell them off. And we will get an earful the next day from our bosses. We still get *wahyu* just not as many as before." Informant 3

Meanwhile, Informant 6 supported stating that they still need to give coverage to events that are "nonsense", as quoted, "we still have to give coverage on things related to Najib. We are still required to give coverage on whatever he said even if it is nonsense." Both Informant 7 and Informant 8 said that in the company they worked for, it is common knowledge for journalists to only give a minimum amount of coverage to the UMNO, now that the party is no longer part of the government. "Based on my observation, events that involved leaders from the opposition are given less coverage." said Informant 7 while Informant 8 mentioned, "We do not give them media coverage; when we do, it is usually done not to highlight their good deeds but their misdeed."

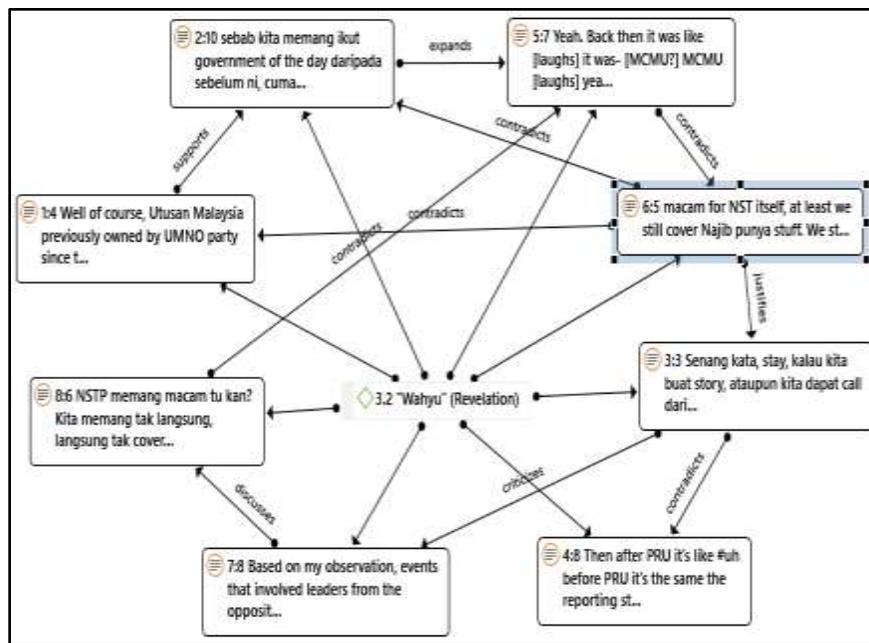


Figure 2. Network analysis on 'wahyu'

4.3 Ownership and Political Affiliation

All eight (8) participants were further asked if the change of shareholders is related to political affiliation. The purpose of this question is to explore if shareholders and its political affiliation can alter content creation in a newspaper.

Out of eight informants interviewed, six informants (Informant 1, Informant 2, Informant 3, Informant 5, Informant 6 and Informant 8) agreed that their new major shareholder has a political affiliation towards a political leader from the government. However, out of these six informants, three informants who are

Informant 1, Informant 2 and Informant 3 said it was a necessity for mainstream media to have owners who have a political inclination towards the ruling party.

Informant 1 as quoted as saying,

“GE14 is a historical event where the citizens witnessed a change of government for decades. It’s not only a change of government, but also change of the country economy, social system, education, and so many things. So yes, like the new body of government took place, it’s just the same case with ownership of some media agency, mainstream or not. So, there is a link between the change of government with the change of the whole system, yeah. For example, a few big shots in a certain company, for example like Maybank, Bank Islam, who previously had a strong connection with the previous government, previous politicians in the previous government, they were sacked. So, there’s obvious comparison *lah*. After sacking these people, they would bring the people linked to the new government to lead these companies the GLC and whatnot.”

Informant 2 justified Informant 1’s statement; stating that under the new ownership, the bosses now need to “rub shoulders” with the new government. Informant 2 was quoted as,

“I feel like there is a necessity for mainstream media owners to have political affiliation with the current government or else how would they survive? There is a need to connect. Only after building rapport can all these Wahyu come down. By doing this, a press secretary can directly contact our bosses and request for stories about them. Us journalists are the ones who need to write those articles. We have survived for one year and five months since the General Election. and I saw my bosses having meetings with ministers to set up special interviews. I’m sure they meet to build rapport, right? They could be discussing doing a big Q and A interview. This shows that they really want to highlight those ministers in the media. This means there needs to be a connection between media owners and their political affiliation.” Informant 2

Informant 3 also felt that newspaper company owners are linked to political parties but should not rely their survivability on the party that owns them. Informant 3 said,

“Normally when a party falls, so will the media agency it owns. But this depends on the management. For example, The Star, although owned by MCA, but their finances are stable as they have steady management. Although politically, they faced a terrible loss, their newspaper is not affected. This is because their CEO changed their content; they have good content.” Informant 3

When posed this question, Informant 4, refused to answer, as quoted,” [laugh]. Actually, on that, to explain, I think I better not answer on this *lah*. *Boleh ke?*” (“Is it okay?”). Meanwhile, Informant 5, Informant 6, and Informant 8 agreed that while the new shareholder is closely linked to a political leader of the country, he has yet to take advantage of his ownership to his advantage. Informant 5 said,

“He’s known to be a quite *uhh* Tun Mahathir’s fan himself *uhh* but I don’t know. But again, I guess from- he must be looking at us as a, from a business point of view. So, if yeah, I think I guess we haven’t like gotten anything, any flag from him *lah*.”

Sharing the same sentiment, Informant 8 stated,

"Perhaps we have yet to see it happening as he might be a low-profile kind of guy. We wouldn't know, right? Even if you want to be free, no one wants to fund you. Who would want to fund an independent media? Who would want to give their money to someone who has no direction?" Informant 8

4.3 Direction of Media Organization

All eight (8) participants were then asked if the change of shareholders steered the company's direction in terms of content creation. The purpose of this question is to explore if an adjustment in journalism practice among journalists was required after companies' buy out. Out of the eight informants interviewed, seven informants (Informant 1, Informant 2, Informant 3, Informant 5, Informant 6, Informant 7 and Informant 8) believed that their company's direction in terms of content creation has changed or is going to change. The other informant, Informant 4, expressed hope that the company's direction would not depend on shareholder's political vision in the future. Informant 1 mentioned that although ideally, mainstream media should be running independently, that is not the case we see happening today. Since the company he worked for disposing of 70% for its equity interest, a lot has changed, Informant 1 said,

"It brings huge impact, change of so many things, the working systems, the benefits to the employee, better or worse, working environment, stories, regulations, salary, you name it. It really depends on the new boss, and you just have to follow the flow. People should own the media, and should support by buying news, so the mainstream media can move forward. But that is not the case in the current situation."

Informant 1 also said that the company's stake was sold to a middleperson who works for the government. Informant 1 said,

"From having a party as a major shareholder to an individual. The public will see that one Datuk (referring to Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary) has bought over the media agency, but in reality, he is a crony that receives orders from a political party." Informant 1

Informant 2 supported Informant 1, saying that there is an agenda behind the change of stake in mainstream media shares. Informant 2 stated,

"Syed Mokhtar holds most of the shares now, which political party does Syed Mokhtar support? Means all the news stories will slant towards that said party as he owns them all. This means there must be a connection. It is the media gameplay. He is pro- Tun, as he started building his career from the bottom back when he has nothing, he owes it to him." Informant 2

Agreeing with Informant 1 and Informant 2, Informant 3 explained that news content has started to be freer as the company move away from focusing primarily on UMNO-related stories. Informant 3 mentioned,

"Yes, the direction has changed. This means that there is no more UMNO-focused story; the content is freer; we also include DAP stories, opposition stories, we are more open. We like it as we prefer to distant paper from being labelled as an UMNO-paper." Informant 3

Informant 6 agreed with Informant 1, Informant 2 and Informant 3 stating that the company's content has changed, as quoted,

"Uhh maybe because our direction pun (also) has changed *lah*. Maybe because of that. Because now we are more like a news magazine, so we do not focus so much on politics uhh not that much on politics. People are still buying our paper and *uhh* of course circulation has increased compared to last year, so people are still buying, people are *uhh* especially after the change where we, after the change in our layout, after the change in our content and things like that." Informant 6

This sentiment is supported by Informant 8, who justified Informant 7's statement saying that the media agency needs to show their political inclination to cater to their audiences' preferences. Informant 8, said,

"Balanced reporting is unsuited for mainstream media as the shareholders have a political inclination towards a party. Of course, I think that everything must have been political. From what I've seen, you really do need to have something to rely on. Like for example, *uhh* you, you support Pakatan Harapan, so you have, you must have your direction and aim. You don't simply write everything if you don't even know whom you want to support." Informant 8

Meanwhile, Informant 5 said that the buy-out of Media Prima and Utusan Malaysia would lead to a media monopoly, thus, possibly restricting media freedom. Informant 5 mentioned that the direction might someday be slanted towards the individual, his family and their businesses as well as the political party he is said to be in support of. Informant 5 said,

"The fact that he also owns Kumpulan Utusan and Media Prima means that there is no media freedom at all. Because he's only human, if his son going to take over and we publish something bad about Syed Bukhari, then we're going to die. So, it's, it's yeah. We'll see how his ownership goes from here on...yeah, he might." Informant 5

5.0 Discussion

The journalism field in the country remains uncertain as journalists themselves are unsure whether they still need to self-censor for the government or if the normally far-fetched term of "free media" is finally here. These boundaries of censorship are drawn by outside powers, such as governments and companies, making journalists or publisher left with little to no choice but to write or publish as they are directed. On the contrary, in self-censoring issue, even if a journalist is not told on what not to write, they can censor themselves by hiding some facts that they think would be dangerous to write. The media practitioners are taking one bold step at a time towards freer journalism, clueless on which move would land them in trouble, if it may cause any. One thing they know for sure, nobody will get reprimanded by the government for painting a positive image on the government. One interesting finding on self-censorship among traditional mainstream media journalists in Malaysia is that they try not to paint the previous government in a negative light. The previous government's influence and culture are still well incorporated in traditional mainstream media journalists' writing. Although these journalists now have a new "boss" to serve, some still feel indebted to UMNO in particular, and this feeling of gratitude is translated in the news produced. The feeling of gratitude is not easy to dust off as journalists who have worked in the industry for a long time find it harder to break the habit to change their style of writing to be pro Pakatan Harapan.

Traditional mainstream media journalists feel that it is their duty to self-censor their writing to minimize harm through ethical journalism. Journalists self-censor and filter what they see and hear intending to maintain public order and protect the community from possible chaos. Moral journalistic considerations were made before relaying the information to the public. On the other hand, minimizing harm could also protect journalists and their publication from receiving an earful from the top management, government or even, have their printing and publication license revoked, at worst. The media practitioners have yet to see any legal action taken against them by the new Pakatan Harapan government. The practice to self-censor for the sake of minimizing harm can be linked to the utilitarianism theory which mentions the correct course of action is one that maximizes usefulness, defined as maximizing happiness and reducing suffering.

Ethical decisions are characteristics of a journalist's profession, and he or she must choose acts that fulfil mass media standards while limiting damage to others. Consequently, the ethical measures taken by journalists are only weighed by its result. However, there are several conflicting opinions on how much attention should be given to its actual consequences, foreseen consequences and expected consequences. Ethical decisions are a pivotal aspect of being a good journalist, and he or she must choose actions that uphold the mass media's responsibilities while minimizing harm to others. Journalists associate the concept

of self-censorship with the protection of state and editorial policies. These traditional mainstream media journalists censor their writing by putting their personal judgement into play as well as their editorial policy principles and objectives.

Shareholders' political affiliation towards a particular party also could possibly play a role in setting the agenda of the public through the media. Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary is seen as a "Mahathir-man" and could now be executing strategies in favour of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Journalists predict that Al-Bukhary would utilise his media machinery if need be as he is the major shareholder of Media Prima Berhad, Kumpulan Utusan Sdn Bhd and some even say The Malaysian Reserve. Several top heads in Utusan and Media Prima have been replaced soon after UMNO started to relinquish their stakes to Al-Bukhary.

This too, suggests that political affiliation could alter content creation produced by journalists as new owners appoint new faces in the editorial's chain of command. The custom of getting "Wahyu" or "Revelation" from the top management of the media house has gone down drastically. In Islam, Wahyu is a divine knowledge relayed to a Prophet directly or by the mediation of an angel, in order to inform the people. This term is widely used among the journalism community in Malaysia as a reference to being forced to write something from "up above". Some mainstream media house no longer entertains redundant or unnewsworthy stories. What is interesting to note here is that the chain of command in Kumpulan Utusan still relay Wahyu on UMNO-related events. This could be because UMNO has minor shares in the company, thus still enforcing their influence as an opposition through a mainstream media news agency. The New Straits Times Group, however, under Media Prima Berhad, no longer gives out orders to news journalists, assigning them to unexciting assignments. Wahyu, often labelled as MCMU (Must Cover Must Use) in editorial's daily schedule, was practised religiously during the premiership of former Prime Minister Najib Razak. All assignments that are marked MCMU would be sent to editors solely to check on errors and once passed; those articles would be published without "gatekeeping" despite the value of its content.

Traditional mainstream media journalists place high hopes in the media mogul to not abuse his ownership for the sake of his political affiliation, directing journalists as puppets in realising government's political agenda. Al-Bukhary is a business tycoon who has the financial resources to turn a sinking company around. Kumpulan Utusan stopped operation temporarily in 2019 and has remerged as a fully online news portal. Media Prima, on the other hand, has undergone numerous separation and retrenchment scheme even before the 14th General Election. Should Al-Bukhary only sees the two companies as a business opportunity, then the slowly increasing press freedom these mainstream media journalists are enjoying could continue to soar even more over the next couple of years.

Lastly, content produced by all five news agencies; Utusan Malaysia, Kosmo, Berita Harian, Harian Metro and New Straits Times have started to steer off of their usual course they have been on for decades. Journalists said that under Pakatan Harapan administration they are writing more deserving newsworthy stories without the demonization of the opposition. Original story ideas are welcomed more openly, and the days of glorifying one political party were deemed as over. However, due to the lack of finances and human resources after the downfall of UMNO, lesser out-of-office assignments are created for journalists by the editors. These news agencies now opened their pages to more non-political advertorials to cover their expenses.

6.0 Conclusion

The study has shown that the self-censorship among mainstream media journalists does occur under the Pakatan Harapan government. The type of self-censorship, however, is not enforced by the government but the media practitioners themselves. By observing self-censorship, mainstream media journalists feel that they can play their part in maintaining peace and stability of the country by minimizing possible harm in their reporting. Although Barisan Nasional is no longer in power, and UMNO is not their major shareholders, mainstream media journalists still have some reservations when criticizing the then government in their work today. The feeling of indebtedness towards the former government has indirectly affected the style of news writing journalists have toward the opposition today.

This research has also explored that mainstream media journalists' do tend to give more news coverage on official government events as compared to news related to the opposition. This shift of focus from Barisan Nasional to Pakatan Harapan happened almost instantly even when UMNO was still holding major stakes in both companies. During this period, mainstream media journalists faced an awkward conflict of interest where they were expected to serve the government of the day while getting paid by their rival, UMNO who has the largest stakes in the two companies.

Lastly, this study proved that there is an influence of the company's major shareholders towards journalists' content creation. News content in Kosmo, Utusan Malaysia, Berita Harian, Harian Metro and New Straits Times are less political, having put more emphasis towards nation-building and human interests' angles. As the new owner of the two mainstream media companies, Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary is known as a successful businessman and not a member of any political party. However, his political affiliation is widely known to be slanted towards Tun Dr Mahathir Mohammed, the prime minister of the current government. This, however, by far has minimal effect on the news organizations he controls, as many have yet to see a clear indicator of him using his influence to determine news content in the media agencies he monopolized.

7.0 References

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