

Online Incivility: The Shaping of Online Discussion by MalaysiaKini

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Abstract

This study outlines the general idea of the study of propaganda techniques in online news portal *Malaysiakini* and determining how *Malaysiakini's* presence in providing news and updates in Facebook, is able to excite responses from its audience and visitors through the comments section. *Malaysiakini's* updates in Facebook are shaped in such a way that conforms to propaganda techniques, as news agencies and portals are essentially mechanisms of informing the public and shaping public opinion. This in turn can incite responses from its audience and visitors in the form of comments, where the comments may be expression of statements, opinions and emotions of a positive or negative nature. The qualitative content analysis approach was the methodology used in order to observe this

phenomenon. *Malaysiakini's* articles and coverage regarding hudud, a part of Islamic criminal law other than qisas and takzir was chosen as a base for this study which was conducted from 15th until 24th March 2015. All of the articles were analyzed for the type of propaganda, technique of propaganda utilized for each item, and the corresponding comments that conform to the online incivility. This study found that the propaganda types and techniques employed by *Malaysiakini* in its articles covering the hudud issue can incite online visitors to make either civil or uncivil comments, and would incite the most negative response if the article is directly about the issue of insulting Islam.

Keywords: *hudud, Malaysiakini, online incivility, propaganda, social media*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study aims to show that the online incivility occurs in a Malaysian setting. Following this, the first chapter will outline the aims, objectives and research questions of this study. In order to gather and analyse the data necessary for this study, content analysis was utilized. The later part of the first chapter explains the significance and probable contributions of this study providing a greater understanding of the how online incivility can be the unintended consequence of social media discourse.

From the results of Malaysia's 12th General Elections, the role of online media has proved to be a catalyst facilitating the results, as it saw an increase in popularity rivalling that of the mainstream media [21]. The support given to online media was borne from the disillusionment of the Malaysian public with the mainstream media; the mainstream media was supposedly controlled by the government, thus all news and information disseminated to the public were seen as 'filtered' and 'sanitized', thus not balanced they did not take into account opposing views. *Malaysiakini* is one of Malaysia's premier online news portals. It is one of the players in news reporting that is not affiliated with the government. *Malaysiakini* provides online coverage and commentaries that deviate from mainstream

perspectives, and most importantly, are able to reach a wide audience within the shortest time as they are solely based online. Discussions that are sensitive, taboo or of public interest are able incite intense online reader responses, and those response can be either civil or uncivil. Some have resorted to insults, name calling and vulgarities, where these are behaviours that would be unacceptable in real life.

The present study undertakes to identify the propaganda types and techniques present in *Malaysiakini*'s online news coverage and how they incite online incivility in online users and visitors in the comments section of every *Malaysiakini* article that covers the issue of hudud for the period of 15th March 2015 until 24th March 2015. Despite the myriad numbers of research performed that attest to the benefit of social media as a tool to inform and educate the public on current issues, research is still needed to understand the phenomenon of online incivility, where if left uncontrolled, could affect social and political cohesiveness of a society.

1.1 Problem Statement

Online news in social media is susceptible to manipulation, subversion and propaganda to shape the beliefs and incite reaction from their targeted or intended audience. As the aim of propaganda is to change and influence belief and behaviour, the online content in social media can be manipulated to influence and persuade social media users towards the objective of the propagandist, which may lead to uncivil online behaviour. In an ideal situation, the presence of online news portals in social media perpetuates their role to inform and disseminate news and opinion pieces to the public, similar to that of traditional media such as printed newspapers or broadcasts. The interactivity provided by social media further fosters interaction in the form of feedback to the providers of information.

Within the context of the comments section, since online response is vastly different than face-to-face interaction, the reaction of the audience differs, where instead of a civil discourse, the discussion may unintentionally become uncivil, where users exhibit uncivil behaviour such as name-calling or flaming. This phenomenon of online incivility, if not understood

and addressed, would perpetuate the notion and belief among Malaysian social media users that whatever they post in social media would not have any consequences, whereas in reality insensitive and hurtful remarks are pernicious to a multicultural society such as Malaysia. Hence, there is a need for a new research to understand the propaganda techniques used in online news portals and the responses of their targeted audience within the scope of the how they could unintentionally incite online incivility. The researcher believes that by understanding how such sentiments work in social media in relation to social media postings, public perception can be better gauged and managed, potentially averting public instability.

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory is a theoretical framework that is considered to be one of the most suitable frameworks to examine psychological and behavioural tendencies in mediated communication. This theory is based on three assumptions: (a) audience are active media users; (b) they are goal directed in their behaviour; and (c) they are aware of their needs and select media to gratify these needs [3]. The Uses and Gratifications Theory emphasizes on how the active audience uses and selects media, compared to other theories that focuses on how media influence people instead. This theory presents a good basis for the research of personality traits such as flaming in online forums. The uses and gratifications theory is generally based on the assumption that the media have certain effects can lead to certain behaviours, sometimes without a user's conscious control [4].

According to [3], the Uses and Gratifications Theory focuses on social and psychological motives. These motives help to explain why people use certain technologies and what motivates the people to select certain types of technologies so they can achieve gratifications for the psychological needs behind their motives. Flaming on the Internet is a good fit in the perspective of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. Regarding flaming, [13] stated that the Uses and Gratification theory is very useful in examining

flaming motives in electronic communication, because people can have a tendency towards this behaviour to satisfy certain needs or to achieve certain personal goals. As for gratifications, [13] stated that fulfilling gratifications is different for each medium. Internet users however, are in the position to achieve immediate gratification by posting on a forum or e-mailing.

2.2 Social Media and Malaysians

The rising phenomenon of online media in Malaysia also goes hand in hand with the rise of social media as a viable platform for the exchange of ideas and expression of opinions. In Malaysia, social media is said to have played a role in influencing public opinion and the outcome of the country's 12th General Elections. A lot of research has been conducted to support the notion that social media has played a role in the expression of public opinions and mobilization of social movements. As a result of Malaysia's 12th General Elections in 2008, social media has become the platform for Malaysians to air their views through uncensored channels, thus leading to a new era of democratization in Malaysia [20]. In addition to this, several literatures outlined in the data abstraction section previously are generally in agreement that social media has led to the transformation of how the public consumes information by providing alternative means to the dissemination of information. However, despite the new possibilities provided by the Internet, the process of democratization depends on the context; it may be a new source of information in terms of revolutionizing democracies, but its effects are still minimal [20]. The changes in technology and the blogging arena have also changed the Malaysian government's approaches and policies, particularly in relation to freedom of speech. While online platforms have been utilized by Malaysians to express a range of grievances and causes, there are still a number of sensitive issues (the "three Rs," race, religion, and rulers) that remains extremely sensitive or almost taboo. The Sedition Act prohibits anything that may "promote feelings of ill will and hostility between different races or classes;" "bring into hatred or contempt or ... excite disaffection against any ruler or any government" or the administration of justice; or questions any privileges relating to Malay

as the official language, the special position of the Malays and indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak, and the position of the nine traditional Malay rulers (or constitutional regional monarchs) [5].

2.3 The Hudud Debate in Malaysia

While online platforms have been utilized by Malaysians to express a range of grievances and causes, there are still a number of sensitive issues (the 3R's - race, religion and rulers) that remains extremely sensitive or taboo to be discussed in Malaysia, be it online or offline [5]. Islam is related closely to the belief and principle of the majority of Malaysians, and is a sensitive issue as the Malays feel that religion is inseparable from their daily lives [6]. The 13th General Election results have polarised the Malaysian parliament along ethnic-religious lines, in addition to the increasing interest of Malay-Muslim ethno-nationalist groups to gain support of the Malays by supposedly coming to the defence of Malay economic and political position [7].

The hudud issue, which centers around the efforts of the PAS-centric Kelantan state government to implement Islamic law, is considered as a sensitive and contentious issue since it deals with the issue of religion in a multicultural Malaysia. Hudud is part of the three main types of Islamic criminal law, the hudud, qisas and takzir. The hudud crimes are those with a "set" description of penalty, calling for some form of corporal punishment. Despite disagreements regarding the definition, hudud crimes generally include a) theft, which is punishable by the cutting of one's arm b) zina (fornication and adultery), punishable by 100 lashes for unmarried couple or death by stoning if the convicted is married, c) qazaf (false accusation of zina), punishable by 80 lashes, d) apostasy (leaving Islam), which is punishable by death, e) drinking alcohol, punishable by 40 lashes and f) robbery, which is punishable by either death (if murder is committed) or cutting of one's arms or legs (if only robbery is committed).

For the past 20 years, hudud had been treated as a secondary topic among Malaysians, rising to the fore only when political parties seek Muslim votes during elections. However, when the Kelantan legislative

assembly passed the “hudud bill”, this issue became a legitimate public concern [8]. The revival of the hudud issue to the forefront is emphasized further by Brunei’s adoption of hudud, leading UMNO and PAS to compete for Malay-Muslim support on this issue [9].

2.4 Online Journalism and Malaysiakini

The Internet has made possible the immediate publication and reach of information to the masses. For the corporate media, journalists can publish their materials online as the events occur. The materials that they publish may not necessarily pass through the necessary channels to reach their audience. Before, articles needed to be passed through the editor before something could be published – a necessary role for the gatekeeper of information. Now, the internet has enabled journalists to publish their materials in real time, and sometimes be able to interact with their audience. The notion of obtaining watered down news and analysis becomes moot as the materials are obtained directly from the journalists themselves. It is still a competition of readership; journalists go toe-to-toe with each other to publish their materials as soon as possible and to gain the maximum reach as wide as possible.

Malaysian journalism has a paradoxical media environment that is ‘free-yet-not-free’ where journalists are ‘free’ to report and investigate into issues of public interest as long as they do not contravene the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, which means staying clear of ‘sensitive issues’ as determined by the government [10]. Mainstream media has its constraints as it is traditionally subjected to the necessary filters and gatekeepers, in addition to having to adhere to certain guidelines stipulated by the authorities. Increasingly, there is a demand for a much wider range of information from other traditional sources such as from mainstream print and broadcasts. Publications from PR parties such as Pas’ Harakah and DAP’s Rocket have long held this position since the 1990s. Recent developments and increasing Internet availability have held up efforts to have an alternative form of media, starting with blogs, leading up to dedicated online news sites [22]. These developments have served to

undercut the mainstream media, where it the Malaysian public can get news from a different angle and perspective.

The most prominent of the online news site to this day is *Malaysiakini*, launched by veteran Malaysian journalists Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran at the time of the 1999 elections. The rise of *Malaysiakini* was facilitated by the lack of any legal requirements (at the time) for licensing of online publications, and the Malaysian government's declaration of not censoring the internet [23]. *Malaysiakini* has since evolved to become the most read Malaysian online news site after mainstream papers *Sin Chew Daily* and *Utusan Malaysia*. *Malaysiakini* stands apart from traditional mainstream media in the sense that while it utilizes informative-style reporting, *Malaysiakini* journalists probe the issues and obtain feedback from the ground on what the bread and butter issues are. By choosing to highlight these issues, *Malaysiakini* attempts to use the power of the media in such a way that people start thinking about these issues [21]. However, [18], among the critics that have complained of *Malaysiakini*'s anti-BN bias, has pointed out that "there is not enough quote and fact-checking; there is a lot of he said,she said".

Although *Malaysiakini* has a physical office and an editorial staff, most of its content comes from the audience. As *Malaysiakini* is online based, it is only natural that it would adapt social media platforms as one of the means for *Malaysiakini* to reach its readership in order to gain content from the audience. This requires an extensive interaction program with the public, where *Malaysiakini*'s editors push stories to Facebook, Twitter and Youtube.

2.5 Propaganda Types and Techniques

Propaganda can be described as white, grey, or black, in relationship to an acknowledgment of its source and its accuracy of information [2]. White propaganda originates from a source that is distinguished accurately, and the data in the message has a tendency to be exact. Generally, white propaganda comes from an openly identified source, and it is characterized by gentler methods of persuasion, such as standard public relations

techniques and one-sided presentation of an argument. The source and origin of the propaganda is identified and acknowledged. The origin of the source is from a government or an agency of a government, including military commands at various levels. Despite the general idea that white propaganda presents the whole truth, it can be slanted, selectively left out and distorted by the propagandist.

Grey propaganda on the other hand, does not identify the source and origin of the propaganda material, but is directed towards a target audience. It is somewhere between white and black propaganda. The source may or may not be correctly identified, and the accuracy of the information is sometimes difficult or cannot be ascertained. Such propaganda is used to push official statements by governments, but in a more acceptable and through a more neutral origin.

Black propaganda on the other hand is the exact opposite of white propaganda; its source and origin is falsely attributed, with the intention of causing negative reaction to the audience. It could be identified as being from one source when in reality it is from another. Black propaganda is when the source is concealed or credited to a false authority and spreads lies, fabrications, and deceptions. This type of propaganda is most commonly used to disguise the true origins of the propaganda, where it may come from the enemy such as the opposing country or organization. It may have information that is false and misleading, and may be presented as coming from one side of a conflict, instead of the other side - a false-flag.

The Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) was started in October 1937. Upon its inception, the institute immediately issued a monthly bulletin called *Propaganda Analysis*. In the second issue, the institute publicized an article titled “How to Detect Propaganda”, where it published the seven most common devices or techniques for propaganda. The seven devices or techniques of propaganda outlined by the IPA are used for this study. Most of the techniques that have been recognized by this Institution are relevant in examining the propaganda that exists in mostly all forms of media. The seven propaganda devices or techniques outlined by the IPA are stated in the table below.

TABLE 1
Propaganda Techniques as Outlined by IPA

Techniques	Characteristics
Name Calling	Name-calling is giving an idea a bad label, which can make audiences reject and condemn it without examining the evidence. This technique also involves the usage of insulting language or words, which creates a bad and negative image of the enemy. When the propaganda labels the target as something that the audiences dislike, it is attempting to indirectly arouse prejudice among the target audience. Generally, name-calling uses sarcasm and ridicule and shows up often in political cartoons or writing.
Glittering Generality	Glittering generality is associating something with a virtue word, which can be used to make audiences accept and approve something in question without examining the evidence. Moreover, this technique also can be linked to highly valued concepts that have different positive meanings for some individuals in the specific subject matters. When these techniques are used, they insist on consent without thinking, simply because a significant conception is involved.
Transfer	This technique involves carrying the respect, power and prestige of something respected over to something else in order to make the latter accepted. This technique is often used in politics. In addition, this technique tries to make the subject view a certain thing in the same way as they view another thing, by linking the two in the subject's mind. Transfer can be used to describe something in a positive manner even though it is usually used to transfer the negative and bad feelings from one object to another. The positive feelings can be generated when the audience links the item to something they like, respect and enjoy. However, in politics, this technique is frequently used to transfer blame or bad feelings from one politician to another of his friends or party members, or even to the party itself.
Testimonial	This technique involves having some respected or hated person say that a given idea or program or product or even a person is good or bad. In addition, this technique is closely associated with the transfer technique, in that an effort is made to join an agreeable person to another thing.

Plain Folks	This technique can be seen as the method by which a propagandist – the speaker attempts to encourage the audience that his or her ideas are good, because they are of “the people” – the plain folks. In other words, the plain folk technique is used to convince an audience that the propagandist’s view effectively reflects those of the ordinary person and that they are also operating for the benefit of the ordinary person.
Card Stacking	This technique involves the selection and use of facts or falsehoods, illustrations or distractions and logical or illogical statements in order to give the best or worst possible case for an idea, program, person or product. In addition, card stacking or selective omission also involves only presented information, which is positive to an idea or proposal and omitting information contrary to it. A typical example would be where a product’s positivity is highlighted whilst its negativity or side effects are downplayed. This technique of propaganda is used by political parties to emphasize the good that they have done for their constituency while keeping mum on the negatives. Arguments or evidence that do not support a position are neglected whilst those that support a position are selected, be it true or false.
Bandwagon	Has as its theme “everybody – at least all of us – is doing it!” This technique appeals to the subjects who follow the crowd, who will join simply because others are doing so as well. The bandwagon technique generally tries to persuade and convince the subject or audience that one side is the winning side, simply because more people are on their side. In this situation, the audience is meant to believe that since so many people have joined, the conquest is expected and defeat impossible. In addition, given that most people on average always want to be on the winning side, they are compelled to join in.

2.6 Online Incivility

Incivility is a general term for social behaviour lacking in civility or good manners, on a scale from rudeness or lack of respect for elders, to vandalism and hooliganism, through public drunkenness and threatening behaviour. The word “incivility” is derived from the Latin *incivilis*, meaning “not

of a citizen”[11]. In an online setting, discussion on the Internet can be uncivil, such as offensive comments or replies that normally would not occur in a face-to-face setting. Online incivility can range from unrelated, rude critiques and name-calling [12] to outrageous claims and extremely tense discussion, which is also known as flaming [26]. “Flaming” which is by definition the hostile intention characterized by words of profanity, obscenity and ridicule that inflict harm to a person or organization as a result of disinhibited behaviour, has enormous potential for readership. To make the matter worse any online user can flame away with impunity[13]. People are willing to join in the rage of strangers, if such comments are made anonymously [14]. Flaming can be attributed to anger, where in social media networks, anger is shown to be more influential than other emotions, and they can spread quickly and broadly in the network [27].

Malaysians have not been spared from uncivil online behaviour. Former Tourism and Culture Minister of Malaysia Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz once pointed out in 2013 that social media websites such as Facebook were the root cause of rude or uncouth behaviour by youths. He added that “being rude and saying vile things are possible because the youths can hide behind the walls of cyberspace and are not saying it face to face. If in a face-to-face situation they would not be brave enough to utter those words” [15].

It is a challenge to properly and extensively define incivility, as while some might interpret certain behaviour as uncivil, that same behaviour might be interpreted as appropriate by others. [17] defined online incivility as “features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics”. Meanwhile, [17] has proposed an operational definition of online incivility as follows:

TABLE 2

Operational Definitions and Examples of Five Forms of Incivility

Form of Incivility (intercoder reliability)	Operational Definition	Example
Name Calling	Mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at a person or group of people.	“Just because something is not popular with the beer swilling Texas drawing nascar crowd here does not mean that the rest of the world agrees that it is worthless.” “At least the morons in the state capital no longer have control of this process!”
Aspersions	Mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at an idea, plan, policy, or behavior	“Our justice system is just as corrupt and lousy as any in the world.” “Texting while driving is stupid.”
Lying	Stating or implying that an idea, plan, or policy was disingenuous.	“Americans have been screaming at the top of their lungs that this government is wrong, is corrupt, is lying, is deceiving the people, and is violating our constitution”.
Vulgarity	Using profanity or language that would not be considered proper (e.g., pissed, screw) in professional discourse.	“I hope the voters will ... kickhim out on his pompous ass next election.” “Whitman ... said not one damn word in her article ... all BS just like Obama and just like Bush and just like Romney ... same crap.”
Pejorative speech	Disparaging remark about the way in which a person communicates.	“Quit crying over the spilled milk of” “I am sick and tired of [them] throwing their tantrums”

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook allow users to connect with others without consent, resulting in many strangers in one's network. Furthermore, users can remain anonymous without revealing their true identities. The anonymity and loose social network structure may reduce the need for impression management and lead to free expression of emotions [24]. Anonymous communication is seen as the height of Internet culture that represents the notion of sharing and free speech, where it is seen as morally neutral and should be a strong human and constitutional right [51].

Even before the era of social media, communication between individuals via computer has existed in the form of online discussion forums and chat rooms. This form of interaction has been studied extensively, where among the first topics discussed were on the anonymity and its application in non verbal communication, where by removing a person's identity in a online setting, people would have the tendency to behave in a way that would contrast their usual behaviour when their identity is intact. Computer-mediated-communication (CMC) differs from face to face communication in that the anonymity that the CMC provides has enabled people to behave in a way that is different from their real-life persona when anonymously online. When online, anonymous users tend to suppress their consciousness of consequence and seemed to be less inhibited in their expression.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design



Figure 1: Research Framework (Construct Affecting Action)

The preceding Figure 1 illustrates how cause and effect (causal relationship) are interrelated in this study of *Malaysiakini's* online coverage of the hudud issue in the month of March 2015 and the comments exhibited

by users and visitors to *Malaysiakini's* Facebook page. Figure 1 shows this study's research framework.

The propaganda objectives, types and techniques employed by *Malaysiakini* in covering the hudud issue during this timeframe are the constructs. This study anticipated that the constructs would illustrate the propaganda type and techniques of *Malaysiakini's* online article and the reaction of the followers and visitors that conforms to online incivility.

For the purpose of this study, researcher used inductive methods, with qualitative content analysis as the method of study. Content analysis refer to a family of procedures for the systematic, replicable analysis of text, involving the classification of parts of a text through the application of a structured, systematic coding scheme from which conclusions can be drawn about the message content [16].

3.2 Research Sampling

Malaysiakini's web version of the news reports on the hudud issue between 15th March 2015 until 24th March 2015 was used as the sample for this study, where the period identified was the peak of the debate on the hudud issue as PAS Kelantan was tabling the draft of the hudud law. *Malaysiakini's* reports were selected for this study as *Malaysiakini* has the reputation of being the premier online news portal that is not aligned to the ruling government compared to traditional media. The articles were identified by using the "Search" function in *Malaysiakini's* main page, where the search results would return searches up to a maximum of three months. In this study, the data was collected concurrently as the news coverage developed on the hudud issue.

Every article on the hudud issue was evaluated by directed content analysis. The content of each article used in this study was analyzed to determine the types of propaganda; white propaganda, black propaganda and grey propaganda; and techniques of propaganda – name-calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking and bandwagon. Following this, the comments section were meticulously analyzed for uncivil comments.

4.0 FINDINGS

Based on the data collection strategy utilized in the Malay version of *Malaysiakini* (www.malaysiakini.com), a total of (number of articles) was identified that covered the issue of hudud in the month of March 2015. Although the issue covered was hudud, the context differed as the issue gained coverage during the month. The findings are separated into the assigned themes to better illustrate how the issue of hudud developed in the month.

From all the 35 articles studied, it was determined that *Malaysiakini* used white propaganda as the most applied type of propaganda during the duration of this study and the subject matter of this study. White propaganda is defined as coming from an openly identified source, and it is characterized by gentler methods of persuasion, such as standard public relations techniques and one-sided presentation of an argument. The source and origin of the propaganda is identified and acknowledged. The origin of the source is from a government or an agency of a government, including military commands at various levels. Despite the general idea that white propaganda presents the whole truth, it can be slanted, selectively left out and distorted by the propagandist.

For the duration of this study, *Malaysiakini's* coverage of the hudud issue almost always cited the sources of its information in its news coverage, which verified their origins to the public in terms of its origin. White propaganda was detected in 27 out of the 35 articles covered by this study, as outlined in Table 4.1. However, it was determined that white propaganda is only applied by *Malaysiakini* to PAS, DAP and PKR politicians; for all of BN politicians' statements, *Malaysiakini* did not cite the source of the information, thus making it a hurdle for the audience to verify the source and validity of the information. The sources cited were also vague, such as the article on 15th March 2015 'UMNO Kelantan sokong pindaan enakmen hudud' where the source was not mentioned.

Other than white propaganda, grey propaganda was identified as the second most used propaganda type employed by *Malaysiakini* in its coverage. Grey propaganda is identified as information that do not identify

the source and origin of the propaganda material, but is directed towards a target audience. It is somewhere between white and black propaganda. The source may or may not be correctly identified, and the accuracy of the information is sometimes difficult or cannot be ascertained. Such propaganda is used to push official statements by governments, but in a more acceptable and through a more neutral origin. The utilization of grey propaganda however, was not as extensive as that of white propaganda, where it was found that only 8 out of 35 articles are of this type of propaganda.

The distribution of articles that are grey propaganda was from 16th March 2015 onwards, in which most of the articles were after the date of the tabling of the hudud law by PAS Kelantan. 5 out of 8 of the articles involved statements made by political parties and politicians, in which *Malaysiakini* specifically mentioned the source of the articles as being the politicians, but did not mention the target of their comments, or made vague accusations against the other party. Other than white and grey propaganda, it was discovered that *Malaysiakini* did not implement black propaganda in its coverage of the hudud issue, as all articles cited their sources.

4.1 Propaganda Techniques

In terms of propaganda technique, it was determined that *Malaysiakini* employed a lot of the transfer technique in publishing its news on the hudud issue. The transfer technique involves carrying the respect, power and prestige of something respected over to something else in order to make the latter accepted, where in politics, this technique is frequently used to transfer blame or bad feelings from one politician to another of his friends or party members, or even to the party itself. As the transfer technique is essentially a politician making remarks against other politicians or parties, it was observed that *Malaysiakini* relied on statements from politicians of the opposition parties such as PAS, DAP and PKR, and made figures from each of these parties as the central elements in its reporting. The transfer technique was extensively observed during the days before and after PAS declared its intention to table the draft law on hudud; statements came

mostly from DAP and PKR politicians who explicitly accused PAS of betrayal.

The testimonial technique is the second most widely recognized propaganda technique utilized by *Malaysiakini*. This technique involves having some respected or hated person say that a given idea or program or product or even a person is good or bad. In addition, this technique is closely associated with the transfer technique, in that an effort is made to join an agreeable person to another thing. Table 4.4 lists the articles that were identified to be utilizing the testimonial technique. The testimonial technique was observed to have been extensively applied from 20th of March 2015 onwards, and it involved testimonies from politicians and in the case of Aisyah of the BFM hudud video, her father who is Professor Ahmad Tajuddin of the UTM.

As mentioned, the card stacking technique involves the selection and use of facts or falsehoods, illustrations or distractions and logical or illogical statements in order to give the best or worst possible case for an idea, program, person or product. This technique is usually used by political parties to emphasize the good that they have done for their constituency while keeping mum on the negatives. Arguments or evidence that do not support a position are neglected whilst those that support a position are selected, be it true or false. The glittering generality technique is about associating something with a virtue word, which can be used to make audiences accept and approve something in question without examining the evidence. Name-calling within the context of propaganda is to give an idea a bad label which can make audiences reject and condemn it without examining the evidence, while at the same time giving a bad and negative image of the enemy. The plain folk technique is used to convince an audience that the propagandist's view effectively reflects those of the ordinary person and that they are also operating for the benefit of the ordinary person.

4.2 Distribution of Comments

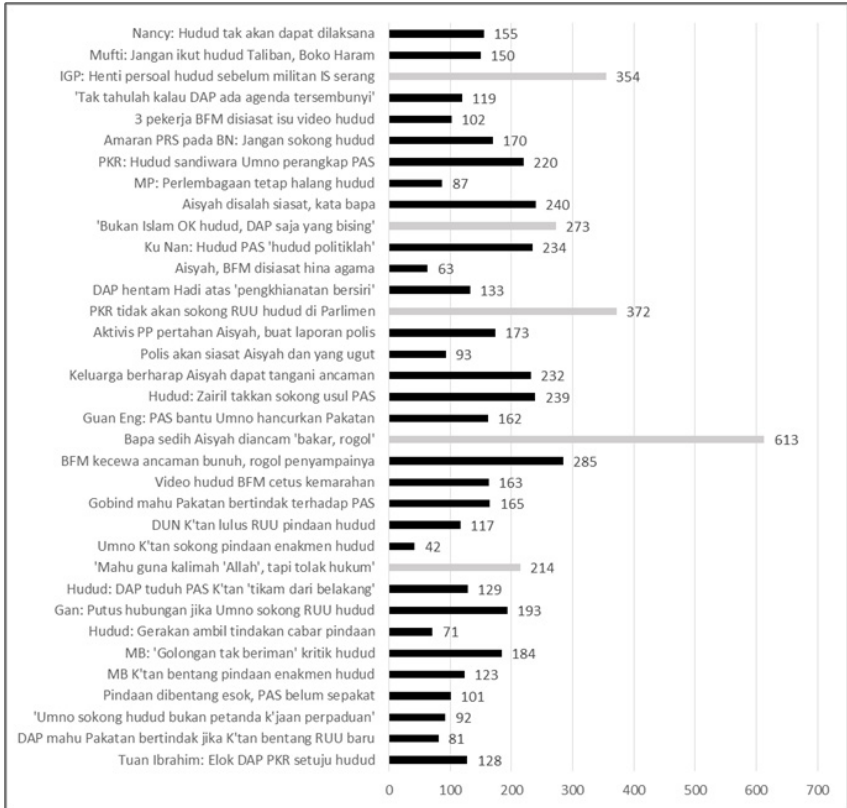


Figure 2: Distribution of Comments over the Period of Coverage

The next part of the findings focuses on the comments section of the *Malaysiakini* articles, where each of the comments section for all the articles was read and analysed for incivility. The distribution of the articles in terms of the number of comments are as listed in Figure 2, where the graph was composed from 35 articles covering the hudud issue over a period of ten days, from 15th - 24th March 2015, where the comments section numbered a total of 6272 comments. As observed, the number of comments registered a gradual increase depending on the nature of article posted by *Malaysiakini*.

In terms of the distribution of comments, it was found that the peak of users' comments on *Malaysiakini's* articles was on 20th March 2015 (613 comments) and had tapered gradually in the following days. The significance of this was that on 20th March 2015, *Malaysiakini* had covered the rape and death threats against a BFM radio presenter, Aisyah Tajuddin who was the actress of a parody that supposedly insulted the implementation of hudud in Kelantan, leading to much public outrage. The article that garnered the most comments was written by Prof Mohamad Tajuddin Mohamad Rasdi, ex-UTM and the father of Aisyah Tajudin, criticizing the Malaysian public's response to his daughter's involvement in the video.

Interest in the hudud issue was reignited again and again by the presence of several articles, leading to a massive spike of online comments when it came to the report on Aisyah of the BFM radio. A total of 5 "spike" articles were identified, highlighted in grey in Figure 2, in which they are listed in Table 3. These "spike" articles are observed to have sustained interest in the hudud issue based on the number of comments for each article. As such, it can be implied that these articles are used by *Malaysiakini* to propagate interest and reaction to the hudud issue. It is also observed that 4 out of the 5 articles are of the white propaganda type.

TABLE 3

List of Articles Exhibiting Spikes in Comments

Date	Article	Propaganda Type
18 March, 2015	'Mahu guna kalimah 'Allah', tapi tolak hukum' (Want to use "Allah", but reject religious laws)	White
20 March, 2015	Bapa sedih Aisyah diancam 'bakar, rogol' (Father sad that Aisyah is threatened with 'immolation, rape')	White
21 March, 2015	PKR tidak akan sokong RUU hudud di Parlimen (PKR will not support hudud proposal in Parliament)	White

22 March, 2015	'Bukan Islam OK hudud, DAP saja yang bisung' (Non Muslims are OK with hudud; it's just DAP making noise)	White
24 March, 2015	IGP: Henti persoal hudud sebelum militan IS serang (IGP: Stop questioning hudud before IS militants attack)	Grey

4.3 Online Incivility In Comments

Online incivility is defined within five designations, which are name calling, aspersion, lying, vulgarity and pejorative speech. This is listed in Table 4, where it was determined that most of the incivil comments fell under the name-calling type, with a total of 689. This was then followed by vulgarity (166) and aspersion (130). Lying and pejorative speech had small number of occurrences, at 28 comments at 10 comments respectively.

TABLE 4

Distribution of Uncivil Comments for all Articles

Date	Article	Distribution of Uncivil Comments					Total Number of Incivil Comments
		Name Calling	Aspersion	Lying	Vulgarity	Pejorative for Speech	
15 March, 2015	<i>Tuan Ibrahim: Elok DAP PKR setuju hudud</i> (Tuan Ibrahim: It's good if DAP and PKR agrees to hudud)	24	8	1	0	1	34
16 March, 2015	<i>DAP mahu Pakatan bertindak jika K'tan bentang RUU baru</i> (DAP wants Pakatan to act if Kelantan tables new laws)	8	1	1	5	1	16
16 March, 2015	<i>'Umno sokong hudud bukan petanda k'jaan perpaduan'</i> (Umno supporting hudud doesn't mean a unity government)	21	1	2	0	1	25

17 March, 2015	<i>Pindaan dibentang esok, PAS belum sepatok</i> (Amendments to be tabled tomorrow; PAS is not entirely in agreement)	8	1	1	1	0	11
18 March, 2015	<i>MB K'tan bentang pindaan enakmen hudud</i> (Kelantan State Minister to table amendments to hudud enactment)	18	1	0	5	0	24
18 March, 2015	<i>MB: 'Golongan tak beriman' kritik hudud</i> (MB: "Infidels" criticize hudud)	32	7	1	5	0	45
18 March, 2015	<i>Hudud: DAP tuduh PAS K'tan 'tikam dari belakang'</i> (Hudud: DAP accuses PAS Kelantan of stabbing them in the back)	12	7	1	2	2	24
18 March, 2015	<i>Gan: Putus hubungan jika Umno sokong RUU hudud</i> (Gan: Cease ties if UMNO supports hudud amendments)	21	4	2	3	1	31
18 March, 2015	<i>Hudud: DAP tuduh PAS K'tan 'tikam dari belakang'</i> (Hudud: DAP accuses PAS Kelantan of stabbing them in the back)	16	2	2	0	0	20
18 March, 2015	<i>'Mahu guna kalimah 'Allah', tapi tolak hukum'</i> (Want to use "Allah", but reject religious laws)	24	2	0	4	0	30
18 March, 2015	<i>Umno K'tan sokong pindaan enakmen hudud</i> (Umno Kelantan supports amendments to hudud enactment)	3	1	0	0	0	4

19 March, 2015	<i>DUNK'tan lulus RUU pindaan hudud</i> (State Assembly passes amendments to hudud law)	13	3	0	0	0	16
19 March, 2015	<i>Gobind mahu Pakatan bertindak terhadap PAS</i> (Gobind wants Pakatan to act on PAS)	17	1	0	4	0	22
20 March, 2015	<i>Video hudud BFM cetus kemarahan</i> (BFM's hudud video incites anger)	21	1	1	13	0	36
20 March, 2015	<i>BFM kecewa ancaman bunuh, rogol penyampainya</i> (BFM disappointed regarding the threat to rape and kill its presenter)	37	4	1	15	0	57
20 March, 2015	<i>Bapa sedih Aisyah diancam 'bakar, rogol'</i> (Father sad that Aisyah is threatened with 'immolation, rape')	69	13	0	17	0	99
20 March, 2015	<i>Guan Eng: PAS bantu Umno hancurkan Pakatan</i> (Guan Eng: PAS helping Umno to destroy Pakatan)	19	2	1	7	0	29
20 March, 2015	<i>Hudud: Zairil takkan sokong usul PAS</i> (Hudud: Zairil will not support PAS' proposal)	34	7	1	4	0	46
21 March, 2015	<i>Keluarga berharap Aisyah dapat tangani ancaman</i> (Aisyah's family hopes that she can cope with threats)	12	7	0	10	0	29
21 March, 2015	<i>Polis akan siasat Aisyah dan yang ugut</i> (Police to investigate Aisyah and those making the threats)	9	2	0	11	0	22

21 March, 2015	<i>Aktivis PP pertahan Aisyah, buat laporan polis</i> (Penang activists defend Aisyah, make police report)	21	5	0	7	0	33
21 March, 2015	<i>PKR tidak akan sokong RUU hudud di Parlimen</i> (PKR will not support hudud proposal in Parliament)	22	7	0	14	1	44
21 March, 2015	<i>DAP hentam Hadi atas 'pengkhianatan bersiri'</i> (DAP accuses Hadi of 'serial betrayal')	15	2	0	1	1	19
22 March, 2015	<i>Aisyah, BFM disiasat hina agama</i> (Aisyah, BFM under investigation for insulting religion)	8	2	0	3	0	13
22 March, 2015	<i>Ku Nan: Hudud PAS 'hudud politiklah'</i> (Ku Nan: PAS' hudud is 'political hudud')	21	2	0	3	0	26
22 March, 2015	<i>'Bukan Islam OK hudud, DAP saja yang bising'</i> (Non Muslims are OK with hudud; it's just DAP making noise)	14	8	0	4	2	28
22 March, 2015	<i>Aisyah disalah siasat, kata bapa</i> (Aisyah wrongly investigated, father says)	39	5	0	7	0	51
22 March, 2015	<i>MP: Perlembagaan tetap halang hudud</i> (MP: The Constitution will block hudud)	9	0	0	1	0	10
22 March, 2015	<i>PKR: Hudud sandiwara Umno perangkap PAS</i> (PKR: Hudud a ploy of Umno to trap PAS)	16	8	0	3	0	27

22 March, 2015	<i>Amaran PRS pada BN: Jangan sokong hudud</i> (PRS warns BN: Do not support hudud)	21	4	0	5	0	30
23 March, 2015	<i>3 pekerja BFM disiasat isu video hudud</i> (3 BFM employees under investigation for hudud video)	9	3	1	4	0	17
23 March, 2015	<i>'Tak tahulah kalau DAP ada agenda tersembunyi'</i> (Don't know if DAP has a hidden agenda)	7	2	3	1	0	13
24 March, 2015	<i>IGP: Henti persoal hudud sebelum militan IS serang</i> (IGP: Stop hudud debacle before IS militants attack)	43	1	3	3	0	50
24 March, 2015	<i>Mufti: Jangan ikut hudud Taliban, Boko Haram</i> (Mufti: Do not follow Taliban's, Boko Haram's hudud)	8	4	1	4	0	17
24 March, 2015	<i>Nancy: Hudud tak akan dapat dilaksana</i> (Nancy: Hudud can never be implemented)	18	2	5	0	0	25
	TOTAL	689	130	28	166	10	1023

4.4 Recurring Words Used in Online Incivility

This study found that several words keep recurring that fall under the name-calling type and aspersion, in which they are “bodoh” (stupid) with 404 mentions, “kafir” (infidel) with 256 mentions, “kafir” (the Malay slang of the word “kafir”) with 43 mentions, “bangang” (idiot) with 96 mentions and “bangsat” (leper) with 21 mentions. As for vulgarity, the recurring words are “betina” (derogatory for female) with 85 mentions, “babi” (pig) with 64 mentions, “laknat” (curse) with 27 mentions and “fuck” with 14 mentions.

4.5 Distribution of Comments vs Articles Employing White Propaganda

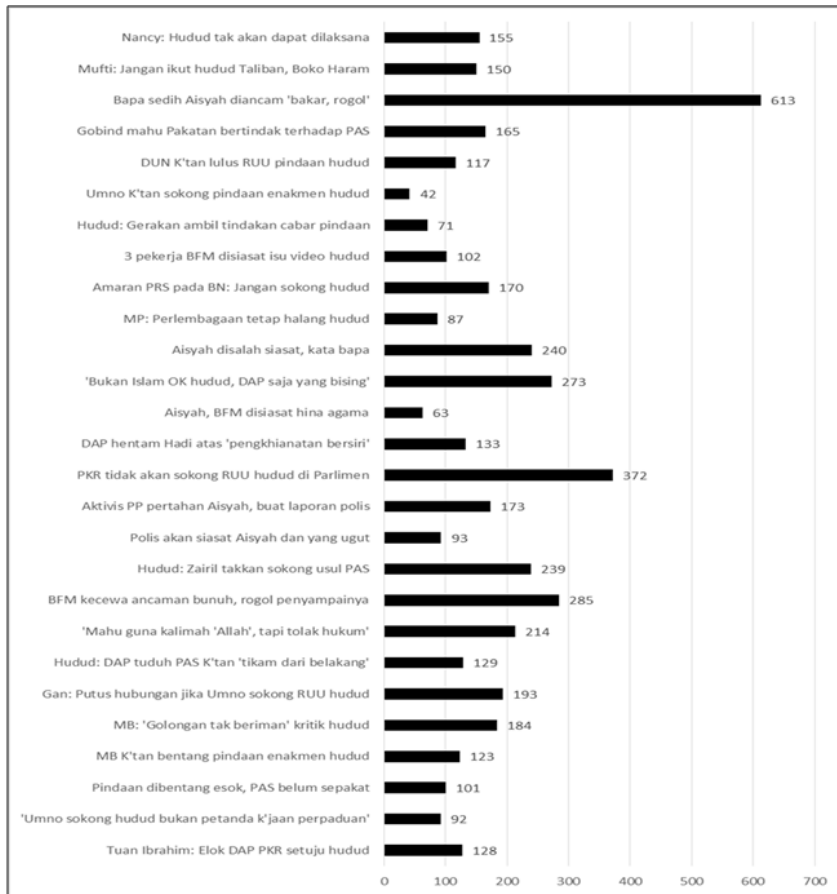


Figure 3: Distribution of Comments Against Articles that Employ White Propaganda

Malaysiakini coverage of the hudud issue for the period had employed mostly white propaganda, which was 27 out of 35 articles during the period covered. . In terms of how the utilization of white propaganda garners public reaction, all articles that were classified under white propaganda are compared to the total number of comments, as illustrated in Figure 3. White propaganda is defined as coming from an openly identified source, and it is characterized by gentler methods of persuasion, such as standard

public relations techniques and one-sided presentation of an argument. The source and origin of the propaganda is identified and acknowledged. The origin of the source is from a government or an agency of a government, including military commands at various levels. Despite the general idea that white propaganda presents the whole truth, it can be slanted, selectively left out and distorted by the propagandist. The distribution of comments in the articles that employed white propaganda as their type displayed a significant number of ups and downs. It is observed from the figure above that for articles employing white propaganda, there were significant users commenting on the articles if it was regarding UMNO and its coalition parties, and if the article was with regard to the BFM hudud video. As the purpose of this study is to gauge online incivility, the same number of articles above is compared again with the number of incivil comments, as illustrated in Figure 4.

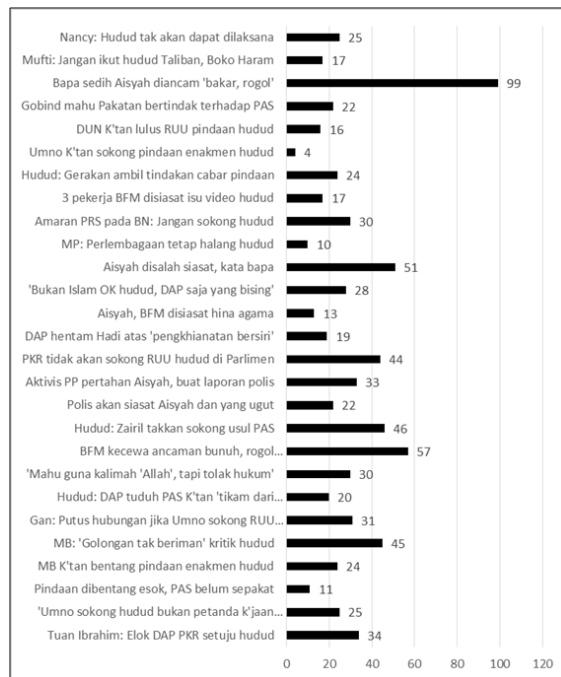


Figure 4: Distribution of Uncivil Comments Against Articles that Employ White Propaganda

The other type of propaganda commonly used by *Malaysiakini* in covering this issue is grey propaganda. Grey propaganda is defined as information where the source and origin of the propaganda material is not defined, but is directed towards a target audience. It is somewhere between white and black propaganda. The source may or may not be correctly identified, and the accuracy of the information is sometimes difficult or cannot be ascertained. Such propaganda is used to push official statements by governments, but in a more acceptable and through a more neutral origin.

However, the number of articles that falls under this propaganda type was not as significant as that of white propaganda; only 8 out of 35 articles was detected in employing grey propaganda.

5.0 DISCUSSION

Malaysiakini is a purely online news agency that publishes its news to its target audience according to its own preferences. As *Malaysiakini* presents itself as an alternative news outlet compared to the mainstream media such as the print media Utusan Malaysia, more often than not, biases are present when it comes to *Malaysiakini's* coverage of both BN and PR politicians. During Malaysia's 12th General Elections in 2008, *Malaysiakini's* role as an independent online news media has proved to be a catalyst facilitating the results of that election, in addition to having an increased popularity rivalling that of the mainstream media [21].

The major themes of the Uses and Gratification Theory is that compared to other communication theories that seek to explain the uses and functions of the media for individuals, groups and society in general. The theory suggested communication as an impact from the media to the public, where it is the audience that is responsible for selecting media outlets that best fulfil their needs and that such media outlets are being used by the audience to fulfil their gratifications. Within the context of this study, *Malaysiakini* and its presence in Facebook represents the media outlet that is used by online users to fulfil their gratification for information. It was also discovered from a "needs" perspective that

from all of the commentators listed in all comments section for each article, some are repeat commentators, or offenders that perpetuate online incivility in some cases.

From *Malaysiakini*'s coverage of the hudud issue for the time frame between 15th March 2015 until 24th March 2015, it was discovered that *Malaysiakini* employed extensive use of white propaganda. This was because 27 out of the 35 articles explicitly stated the sources of all the information, which were usually the politicians. Being an alternative media that is not aligned with the mainstream media, it was obvious that *Malaysiakini* focused more on statements made by PR politicians such as that from PAS, DAP and PKR. [18] complained of *Malaysiakini*'s anti-BN bias and pointed out that "there was not enough quote and fact-checking; there was a lot of "he said,she said". Some coverage was done on BN politicians, but these were not as extensive.

Malaysiakini's use of white propaganda type follows the definition of white propaganda, where white propaganda can be attributed to an openly identified sources and in the case of this study, from BN or PR politicians which are characterized by gentler methods of persuasion, such as standard public relations techniques and one-sided arguments. The source and origin of the propaganda is identified and acknowledged. However, despite the general idea that white propaganda presents accurate information, it can be slanted, omitted and distorted by the propagandist, where this is obvious in all *Malaysiakini* articles that are slanted in favour of the PR's views, rather than BN's views.

It is observed that *Malaysiakini*'s use of grey propaganda was not as frequent as white propaganda, but nevertheless there were a lot of comments depending on who the subject was. In the article "IGP: Henti Persoal Hudud Sebelum IS Serang" (IGP: Stop Questioning Hudud Lest IS Attacks), as the subject was the Inspector General of Police, Khalid Abu Bakar, many comments were made against his statement. Grey propaganda is categorized as information that does not identify the source and origin of the propaganda material, but is directed towards a target audience. It is somewhere between white and black propaganda. The source may or

may not be correctly identified, and the accuracy of the information is sometimes difficult or cannot be ascertained. Such propaganda is used to push official statements by governments, but in a more acceptable and through a more neutral origin.

Interestingly, it was determined from the results that *Malaysiakini* did not implement black propaganda in its coverage of the hudud issue, as all sources of its articles were properly cited, be it from PR politicians or BN politicians.

In terms of the propaganda techniques, it was identified that various techniques were used in *Malaysiakini's* articles. The transfer technique was the propaganda technique or “devices” that was most frequently employed by *Malaysiakini* where the statements consisted of politicians criticizing other politicians or other political organizations. Naturally, as *Malaysiakini* is an alternative news source, the articles extensively quoted statements from PR politicians compared to BN politicians. Again, this fits in with the Uses and Gratifications Theory where online users or visitors go to *Malaysiakini* to get information from other viewpoints, rather than that of the government.

All articles analysed by this study have comments, regardless of the propaganda types or techniques employed. The presence of the comments in the comments section shows that online users or visitors to *Malaysiakini* utilize this section to express their opinions, which may lead to an opportunity for users to “vent” on social media as outlined by online incivility. The expression of opinion in social media, either civil or uncivil conforms to the “gratifications” theme of the uses and gratifications theory [19]. The ability to vent on social media platforms may make it as a go-to-mechanism for gratification.

As for the users’ comments on the articles, the number of comments depended on the nature of the articles itself. From Figure 3, it is observed that the number of comments was usually marginal when they involved statements from PR politicians. The number increased when BN politicians were quoted, but then again this depended on the slant of the articles. As

such, the articles that gained the most comments were those that dealt with Islam directly, such as the issue of insulting Islam. This shows that issues that revolved around insult or demonization of Islam remained sensitive among Malaysians and directly insulting Islam would generate a response in an online setting. As such, it is obvious that discussions on the 3R issues (race, religion, royalty) remained contentious and would generate the most response from the Malaysian public. As propaganda essentially seeks to evoke emotional responses in its target audience, the deliberate use of 3R issues in an information warfare setting to incite responses in a target population is definitely possible in Malaysia, based on the results of this study.

Interestingly, based on Figure 3, it is observed that the number of comments per article within the period of coverage has exhibited “spikes” – the significant increase in the number of comments following an article. A gradual increase was detected on several issues, in which it is seen that interest in the hudud issue was reignited again and again by the presence of several articles, leading to a massive spike of online comments when it came to the report on Aisyah of the BFM radio. A total of 5 “spike” articles was identified. It is highly possible that these may represent public interest in the issues where it might rise or fall depending on how the news was presented on a day-to-day basis. These can be replicated in an information warfare setting, where by using the appropriate propaganda types and techniques, public interest or outrage on an issue can be sustained by selectively planting “spike” articles to maintain the visibility of an issue.

The results illustrate that online incivility occurs in all comments sections for all articles, conforming to at least either one of the five types. Incivility types vary depending on the topic of the *Malaysiakini*'s article, with sensitive topics such as insult to religion, in this case Islam, having the most impact to stir incivility. The three most recurring types of online incivility are name-calling, aspersion and vulgarity, where name-calling and vulgarity have the most numbers. Comparing this to the list of curse and offensive words and their subsequent frequency of mentions, it can be inferred that Malaysians are easily disinhibited online to say such words.

This is described as the toxic dis-inhibition effect where people use rude language, harsh criticism, anger, hatred and threats to express themselves in online comments [1].

Should uncivil comments be allowed to occur without restriction, they might become common and widely present that they become tolerable. If this is the case, the concern is that the acceptance of such behaviour would certainly change the social convention of Malaysians' online behaviour. Vulgar and cuss words that are considered unacceptable in real life face-to-face conversations might become acceptable in social media platforms such as Facebook if the behaviour is not reprimanded. Online incivility could affect people's attitude by flaming, loathing for opposing views and total rejection of any government policies, regardless of how good and sound the policy was in the first place.

Malaysiakini appears not to have moderated its comments section at all; inspection of all 6272 comments did not find any instance of *Malaysiakini* making comments or responding to its online users and commentators for all 35 articles. In addition, no effort was detected from *Malaysiakini* to delete uncivil comments, no matter how vulgar they were. The lack of authority to govern commentators is another reason why online incivility occurs, where in the absence of social cues in face-to-face communication that represents authority, such as between a teacher and a student, or between a senior and a junior, people become equal online. There is no such authority or an Internet government. As such, since people feel freer online, this emboldens them to reduce their inhibitions and express themselves [1].

6.0 CONCLUSION

Malaysiakini is the premier alternative news media that is solely based online, in which it seeks to provide a different channel of news from the traditional government controlled media. Since its inception, it has garnered much public interest from Malaysians, where *Malaysiakini* is the go-to online portal to gain alternative reporting and news. However, it is not completely free from the utilization of propaganda types and

techniques in its reporting, as its news reporting might be slanted in favour of the PR rather than the government. This is understandable due to the nature of *Malaysiakini* as an alternative news source. As seen from the scope of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, people seek the media that they prefer to gratify their needs; in this case Malaysians turn to *Malaysiakini* for their source of information regarding issues of social, political and economic issues. Again, the information might be subjected to propaganda. In terms of propaganda types and techniques, *Malaysiakini* employs mostly white propaganda and the transfer technique in presenting its articles.

Since propaganda seeks to influence and change the behaviour of the intended target audience, *Malaysiakini's* coverage of news satisfies the needs of its consumers; affecting them to satisfy their need for information, conforming to the gratification theme. Gratification comes in many ways, and *Malaysiakini's* comments sections provide the opportunity for expression of opinions. Expression of opinions might be positive and engaging, but they can turn uncivil. Online incivility might arise as a response. In general, the propaganda types and techniques implemented in *Malaysiakini's* articles and coverage of the hudud issue is able to generate a response from followers of *Malaysiakini* in the comments sections, where the comments might turn uncivil depending on the topic of the article discussed and how the news is presented.

Taboo issues such as the 3Rs (race, religion, royalty) remain the most contentious issues that would arouse the most response, including incivilities from the public, even when they are discussed online. Direct criticisms or remarks against religions, especially Islam in Malaysia, would generate strong or negative responses from commentators.

Anonymity contributes to online incivility where people are under the impression that whatever they say and write online is of no consequence as there is no face to face communication when online as well as lack of authority figures to moderate online behaviour. It is discovered that online incivility occurs for all types of articles, depending on the topics presented.

The significance of this study is to show that online news can be subjected to propaganda and could influence the behaviour of the audience consuming the propaganda material, and may lead to online incivility. Online incivility in turn might skew discussions of a particular topic. In the context of information warfare, online incivility might be used to shape public opinion and to stoke public anger towards a particular issue. On the other hand, as comments can be made anonymously, there remains a possibility that online comments and uncivil comments can be artificially created and posted in high numbers to overwhelm legitimate discussions.

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