

## **CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ONLINE NEWS PORTAL: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Content analysis is a well-established research technique that has been used to examine myriad type of texts including political messages. In the field of media research, it is a popular method to examine media contents systematically. At present, researchers continue to apply the established content analysis technique that was originally designed for traditional media on Web-based media and social media. However, the application of an established content analysis in the digital environment was claimed to be problematic by many scholars in view of the liquidity of online content. The paper is based on an empirical work conducted during the general election campaign period in 2013 that examined type of political news reported in a news portal; Malaysiakini. We argued that analysing online news using content analysis requires a different procedure especially in terms of capturing the ever changing content of the news portal. The paper also highlighted issues and challenges of adopting established content analysis technique on online news.

Keywords: content analysis, Malaysiakini, method, liquidity, online news, political news

### **INTRODUCTION**

Three years ago, we have attempted to examine political news content of a popular news portal during the general election campaign 2013. Our concerned was primarily on how to keep track of online news manually? All these while, we have applied content analysis on traditional newspapers in which the content is fixed. On the other hand, online news subject to constant revision, deletion and content's update. Our main question was how to deal with a continuous flow of information from a news portal? Will the same protocol used for traditional newspaper apply to the news portal? This study is primarily guided with an overarching question; what would be the procedure to examine online news particularly in capturing the news, archiving, coding and analysis? This paper described the experience of conducting content analysis on online news portal. It also addressed the challenges that transpired during the research process.

The growth of the Internet and the advancement of Web 2.0 technology have transformed how people socialize, communicate and seek information. This phenomenon includes how people access to news. In 2015 there were approximately 24.1 million Internet users in the country (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2016). In a similar year, the Department of Statistics revealed that the percentage of Internet usage among Malaysians aged 15 and above has increased to 71 percent from 57 percent in 2013. Among popular activities on the Net were participating in social networks (84.3 percent), getting information about goods and services (79.6 percent), playing and downloading games (76.1

percent), emails (68.4 percent) and reading and downloading newspapers, magazines and books (61.1 percent) (Department of Statistics, 29 July 2016). The Internet has primarily affects the journalism practices, news distribution, news consumption and how news diffused in the social system. Freeman (2013) found that most Malaysian particularly young adults choose the Internet as their main source of news as compared to other media. In recent years, most mainstream newspapers in Malaysia have introduced digital version of their respective dailies in order to meet audience current lifestyle and reading habit. This transformation is vital for news organizations' long term survival.

In the area of research, researchers have shifted their focus to online content and this includes Web sites, online gaming, social media and online news. Content analysis is a popular methodology used to study a wide range of media text. Unlike traditional media, digital media appear in different format, frequency and speed. Besides, online media owned unique features such as audio, visual, images, hypertext, hyperlinks and interactive system that are part of the media text. In view of this distinctive attributes, the application of an established content analysis in the digital environment was claimed to be problematic by many scholars (see McMillan 2000; Kuljis and Kim 2010; Karlsson 2012; Sjoavaag and Karlsson, 2016). Drawing from this premise, we argued that analysing online news using content analysis requires a different procedure especially in terms of capturing the ever changing content on the news portal. This study illustrates the process of examining political content on online news portal namely Malaysiakini during the GE13. It also highlighted issues and challenges that transpired during the study.

This article comprises of three major parts. The first part presents literature reviews that explained about newspaper and freedom of the press in Malaysia. The literature also provides information on the development of online newspaper in the country and Malaysiakini's background. It later elaborates on content analysis of online news. The second part of the paper covers on methodology adopted prior to discussion and conclusion.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Newspaper and Freedom of the Press in Malaysia**

A survey conducted by Freedom House (2003) rated Malaysian media as not free (Mohd Azizuddin, 2005). The ruling government; the National Front or Barisan Nasional (BN) that reigns in power since independence has maintained a close relationship with the mainstream press either through ownership or close association. This is evident when Media Prima an investment company of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) (a major key component of BN) owned three mainstream newspapers; Harian Metro, Berita Harian and The New Straits (Reuters Institute, 2017). In addition, The Star is largely owned by Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) another political component of BN. This symbiotic relationship enabled BN to use the press exclusively for their political advantage. Mohd Azizuddin (2005) in his study affirmed that Malaysian government controlled over the press is mainly to maintain national security and political survivability. It has been observed that pro-government news was made more explicit during general election campaign period to influence voters. A study on news coverage during the 2004 general election showed news items that were positive toward BN dominated the mainstream dailies (Mustafa K. Anuar 2005). Furthermore, a content analysis of the Star newspaper showed BN acquired more than 80 percent in terms of news coverage during the general election period in 2008 (Mun & Li

2011). In this context, the press performed a major role in helping to sustain political hegemony of the ruling party.

At this juncture, it is worth to note that controlling the press may no longer be an added value to strengthen a political party but invites more resistance among publics who keen to seek alternative views. Literature affirmed that a strong government's controlled over the mainstream media tend to be a primary factor for the arrival of alternative press including an online news portal in the country. The growth of the Internet has offered wide opportunity for opposition parties to have their own media online. It has been observed that alternative media such as HarakahDaily (previously known as Harakah) and Malaysiakini were gaining popularity during the general election campaign in 2013 as they were viewed as providing more space to the non-ruling elites and presenting issues that were not published in the mainstream media. In other words, alternative press has existed in response to imbalance coverage given by the mainstream media. The symbiotic relationship between the mainstream press and the state has given the ruling government an upper hand to control the content of the press. The mainstream media provide extensive pro-BN news coverage particularly during election campaign period that was unlikely received by the oppositions. Subsequently, the voice of the opposition parties has been marginalised. This imbalanced reporting has weakened the press freedom thus deprived Malaysians from making informed choices in casting their votes (Mustafa K. Anuar 2005). This study argues that online newspaper served as a medium used by the non-elitists to report news from their perspectives that are often suppressed or taken for granted by the mainstream media.

### **The Development of Online Newspaper in Malaysia**

Reuter's Report 2017 revealed that online news portal including the social media have become Malaysians' choice for news. The reported stated that 86 percent of Malaysian used online sources for news (Reuter's Institute, 2017). In view of this encouraging trend the Media Guide 2016 has started to incorporate digital newspaper's circulation in their report. The history of online newspaper in Malaysia started in the early 90s. The NSTP Online was opened for subscription in 1993 and later launched its interactive news services in 1997 (NSTP, 2013). Furthermore, the Utusan Malaysia Online was officially launched in full text and visual in the same year. Chung, Kim & Kim (2010) recognized three types of online newspapers that include the (i) mainstream that offers a second distribution of the printed version such as Utusan Online, Star Online and, (ii) the independent online newspaper that is available on a media outlet's online site only (e.g. Malaysiakini). Finally, (iii) the index online newspaper generally refers to online search engines or portal internet news services that provide a collection of the news content from other newspapers.

Malaysiakini.com is the first independent online newspaper that makes its marked in 1999 to provide balance coverage by revealing information that often remains undisclosed in the mainstream press. Zaharom (2017) in his report affirmed that the declined credibility of mainstream media has made news portal become a medium as choice besides the growing Internet penetration (cited in Reuters Institute, 2017). Similarly, a study conducted in South Korea showed that independent web-based newspapers were considered more credible for political information than traditional media (Kim & Johnson 2009). Idid (2014) explained that press credibility is achieved when the public perceived the reporting as objective, balance and truthful. However, this study exclude credibility dimension of Malaysiakini as it was only interested to examine what frequently reported in the medium.

### *Malaysiakini Background*

It is well accepted that the mainstream media including the newspapers in Malaysia remained as the government mouth-piece that primarily published pro-BN news. The inception of Malaysiakini, an independent online press was dubbed timely as Malaysians were looking for an independent medium that has increased popularity in covering political news in Malaysia over the years. This section provides some background of Malaysiakini.

Malaysiakini; an independent political news portal was a brainchild of Seven Gan and Premesh Chandran both were former journalists of the *Sun* newspaper (Steele 2009). Malaysiakini reached 100,000 visitors a day only after eight month of its establishment and rated as the country most popular website during the 2008 election period (MDIF, 2013). The news site received more than 4.3 million unique visitors on the election night 2013 (Kuppusamy, 17 October 2013). The underlying motive of Malaysiakini was to bring independent and balance reporting to Malaysians. In this context, independence in reporting signifies being critical to ruling coalition and opposition parties, providing documentary evidence and offering voice to the voiceless (Steele 2009, p. 94). In a similar account, Steele (2009) argued that the values of independent journalism practised by Malaysiakini appear as a threat to government authorities. The establishment of Malaysiakini has challenged the media hegemony in Malaysia (Lumsden, 2013). The online newspaper was awarded the International Press Freedom award by the New York based committees to Protect Journalists (see Pang 2006). Malaysiakini sustains its operation by selling advertisement space and subscription fees. According to Pang (2006) Malaysiakini journalists experienced constraints in getting access to government officials as it was labelled as the opposition media. In this context, the journalists used old contacts and friends from the mainstream media as most of them were working with mainstream news organizations to obtain news (Pang 2009; Steele 2009).

The online news portal also gives voice to the voiceless by giving space to opposition members and whistle blowers to express their views. The high number of readerships achieved by Malaysiakini particularly in the last two general elections makes it one of the most influential political news website that worth to be examined. A strong reliance on independent web-based news sites was also evident in South Korea during its 2004 general election (Kim & Johnson 2009). This paper aims to explore major political issues covered by Malaysiakini and how these issues were being covered during the 13th general election in Malaysia. Besides, the study also examines to what extent online news coverage influenced voters' behaviour based on the GE13 result.

### **Content Analysis of Online News**

Content analysis is a classic and widely used research technique to examine myriad of texts including political messages (Bennoit, 2012). Among early scholars who had introduced and refined content analysis as a systematic method to study mass media content was Harold Laswell (1927) in his analysis of propaganda in 1920s (Macnamara, 2005). At the outset, content analysis technique was mainly used for quantitative research. Early scholars of content analysis had emphasized on the objectivity of the analysis (see Berelson 1952, Holsti 1969, Roffe, Lacy and Fico, 2005). In his book, Berelson (1952) defined content analysis as,

‘a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication (p.18). Likewise, advocates of qualitative content analysis also emerged almost at the same time (see Kracauer 1952 in Schreier, 2012, p.13) and offer multiple interpretations from media texts. This paper concurred with Krippendorff (2003) as he affirmed that content analysis is not confined to quantitative approach but is largely useful for qualitative analysis. In addition, we also argued that media texts are to be analysed and interpreted within a specific context. In his second edition, Krippendorff (2003) refined his definition as follows, content analysis is a ‘research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (*or other meaningful matter*) to the context of the use’ (p. 18).

In the past, content analysis was primarily used to study texts from traditional media such as newspapers, television and radio programs, interview transcripts, and official documents. At present researchers continue to analyse texts obtained from the new media that include the World Wide Web, digital version of mainstream newspapers, blogs, Facebook, Youtube and many more. In recent years, there has been an increase of newspaper available online or in a digital version. This also include independent news portal that has been established to serve a specific journalistic purpose. It is worth to note that online news endow with different features thus applying the established content analysis technique to measure these news should be adopted with certain adjustment. Unlike analogue media, online text is depicted as fluid and short-lived (Karlsson 2012). He then emphasized on the liquidity of news and defined it as,

‘Liquid news can therefore be defined as an erratic, continuous, participatory, multimodal and interconnected process that is producing content according to journalistic principles. This involves liquid news stories being published in different drafts, created in cooperation with users, told in multiple modalities, having hyperlinks to different sources, documents and organizations and essentially consisting of ever changing and unruly processes that, in theory, never find a truly finite form’ (2012, p. 388)

Scholars affirmed that applying established content analysis to Web-based content imposed several challenges (Kuljis & Kim, 2010; McMillan 2000) that should not be taken for granted. In his later article, Karlsson and his associates argued that the established content analysis is designed for analogue media thus may not be a suitable tool to measure a new form of medium (Karlsson and Sjovaag, 2016).

The following section presents the steps in examining political related news from an online news portal, Malaysikini during the GE13. Following McMillan (2000) the methodology section addressed five primary steps of conducting data analysis for the Web-based content.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *(i) Research questions*

Unlike the print version, online news portal is updated frequently and has unique components such as hyperlinks, audio, video. McMillan (2000) argued that each individual may interact differently towards a content of a web site thus affects the research question. However, this study only intended to primarily examine news content that exclude images, audio, video,

animation and hyperlinks. The following research questions have been formulated to guide the research:

- a) What kind of political issues being reported in Malaysiakini?
- b) What news slant has been adopted towards Barisan Nasional (BN), opposition and NGOs?
- c) What source of information frequently used by Malaysiakini?
- d) Which individuals/organizations often quoted in news article

*(ii) Sampling*

The study adopted a purposive sampling that examined political news within a specific time frame from an online news portal; Malaysiakini. This newspaper was selected in view of its establishment as the oldest and a well sought after online news portal that has now reached over 2.5 million readers monthly (About Malaysiakini, n.d). Previously, the news site was rated as the most popular website in the country in the 2008 general election (Malaysiakini, 8 July 2008). The study was carried out from the first day of official campaign period (April 20<sup>th</sup> 2013) until a day after election (6<sup>th</sup> May 2013) where 872 political related news was drawn.

*(iii) Categories*

Content analysis requires a set of categories that coders will use to assign numeric values media texts. This study adopted a set of categories from previous research conducted by a group of researchers from the National University of Malaysia (UKM) headed by Profesor Syed Arabi Idid. In other words, the categories were obtained deductively. There were eighteen main categories adopted that include economy, politics, leadership, national security, religion, national unity and election. There were sub-categories under each main category.

*(iv) Coders' training and codebook*

Four coders were appointed to examine political news from Malaysiakini's portal for 16 days. Coders were given a codebook prior to data collection and coding exercise. Codebook entails a clear instruction and guidelines that were useful for coders. The codebook specifies components, key concepts in news items that ought to be analysed and how to code them. According to Benoit (2011) the main function of codebook is to specify the procedures that will allow researchers to accomplish the purpose of conducting the study. Training the coders and checking the reliability of their coding skills is essential. Krippendorff proposed at least to use two coders to determine the reliability of the coding scheme (cited in McMillan, 2000, p. 88). In this study, two coders were assigned to code Bahasa news and another two to code English news. All coders were first briefed face-to-face about the nature of the research, the research objective and research question. Next, we explained to them about the importance of the coding exercise. They went through practical exercise by examining news from Malaysiakini (for both English and Bahasa versions) few days before the election campaign period.

(v) *Data analysis and interpretation*

The study found 45 percent political news reported in Bahasa and 55 percent was reported in English. In terms of news sources, Malaysiakini relied on other news agency and mainstream newspaper such as BERNAMA, Reuters, Malay Mail and others just like other mainstream media. Issues related to election and politics secured high rating due to ‘timeliness’ – the study was conducted during the general election campaign period. Election issues mainly include political party manifesto and credibility of political party and candidates. It is common to use manifesto as a tool to influence votes. Therefore the role of media in promoting manifestos should not be underestimated (as media do have a role to promote political parties manifestos directly or indirectly). Besides, credibility of party and candidates were dominantly covered. Candidate here refers to who is the candidate/personality rather than a political party to represent the constituency. The data revealed that more than 50 percent of political news in Malaysiakini was balanced toward the government. News that balanced towards opposition and pro opposition only scored 3 percent and 15 percent respectively. However, despite a balanced coverage towards the government the numbers did not translate in the result of the recent GE. As we all aware BN still failed to win 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the majority.

## **DISCUSSION**

Unlike traditional newspaper, online news production did not follow a normal working routine. Space and time appeared as a real challenge to coders as news constantly changed, added, deleted at any time. During the election campaign period, news was published as early as 1.00 am in the morning. In order not to miss out any news, coders have monitored the news portal at three regular intervals; morning, afternoon and late evening. At the same time, news related to political issues range from 15 to more than 30 news within 24 hours. Karlsson (2012) asserts that online news is not a product but a process that has no specific beginning or ending. This unique element of ‘liquid news’ imposed challenge particularly when a research technique that was originally designed to measure traditional media content was used on new media. He stated this challenge as follows,

*‘The principle problem is that liquid news changes erratically and therefore poses a challenge to traditional content analysis, which treat content as definite’* (Karlsson, 2012, p.391-392)

Karlsson and Sjoavaag (2016) caution that online news are not ‘frozen entities’ thus demand real time observation from the analyst. In order to overcome the issue of rapid changes of online news, coders have copied-and-saved the all political related news item in Words file. Beside the news, actual time published and dates were also recorded. In order to facilitate the coding process, all identified news was printed out and compiled according to their respective dates and time. Later, all news was examined and coded using the coding sheet provided. Likewise, McMillan (2000) suggested coders to evaluate sites that have been downloaded as an alternative to ensure coders are coding identical data at the same time. In this case coding online news appeared to be no different from coding the traditional news. The same technique adopted by Kuljis & Kim (2010) when they downloaded profile page of selected blogs posted by users from South Korea and United Kingdom. These downloaded blogs’ content are ‘frozen in time’ to preserve the content from any changes and facilitate coding process (McMillan 2000;Kuljis & Kim 2010). At present, there is no standard protocol on how to

archive online news. However, the process of capturing the news in a timely manner, archiving news item for coding was rather tedious. This study concurred with Karlsson (2012) that content analysis of news on online platform is a demanding tasks as analyst need to capture real time news and alert with constant flow of information that appear at any time of the day.

## **CONCLUSION**

Krippendoff (2004) affirmed that methodology is all about the research process. He argued that content analysts should strive to explicate the process and describe how they derived at certain judgments so that others can replicate results. Therefore, it is essential for researcher to follow systematic steps and procedures to achieve this purpose. However, applying an established content analysis on online media is indeed a demanding task and posed a unique challenge. Scholars affirmed that in view of online news liquidity ‘it needs to be studied on its own evasive terms rather than on those of print-biased journalistic research’ (Deuze, 2008b; Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009; Shoemaker and Vos 2009 cited in Karlsson, 2012, p. 398).

This research has adopted a standard approach of conducting a content analysis. It has been guided with a clear research questions that primarily aim to explore type of political news reported and their slant towards the ruling government and opposition parties. In this research sampling was rather straightforward as we focused on specific time frame to collect data. The unit of analysis was any political related news that was reported within the period of the general election campaign. An independent news portal has been identified for this purpose. Categories were obtained deductively from previous research. The study also took into account on the coding protocols; preparation of the coding booklet, training of coders, coding sheet prior to the coding exercise. Unlike traditional print media, online news content is not fixed. The process of monitoring and identifying news is laborious. In this context, coders were expected to keep track of emerging news within 24 hours and to archive identified news both in soft-copy and hard-copy prior to coding exercise. Skalski, Neuendorf and Cajigas (2017) in their recent work have identified several ways used by researchers to archive Web based content including online news. However, till now neither standard protocol nor clear guideline to archive news in the digital environment has been deliberated. Based on empirical work conducted on political news coverage in Malaysiakini, we found data collection and coding appear to be a real challenge in the research process. The role of content analyst was indeed instrumental as they need to closely monitor news emerging from the sites and make the right selection. This paper concurs with Karlsson and Sjoavaag (2016) when they proposed that ‘liquid content analyst’ (p.187) should consider themselves as part of research tool akin to qualitative approach.

The characteristics of online media are constantly changing. More features are added to improve their function and usability. Online media offer more text (beyond written texts) to be analysed and thus adjustment to an established content analysis protocol is necessary. This paper urged for far-sighted and creative researchers to improve the existing methodology that suits the ever changing feature of online media.



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