



**REPORT ON THE QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA  
MONITORING INITIATIVE FOR THE 12TH GENERAL  
ELECTIONS**

**29 MARCH 2008**

**CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM in collaboration with  
WRITERS' ALLIANCE FOR MEDIA INDEPENDENCE  
CHARTER 2000 - ALIRAN**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Election reporting a timely reminder for media to go back to basics**

There are foregone conclusions that the mainstream media would be biased or report in favour of the Barisan Nasional and function as a mouthpiece of the ruling coalition. Previous studies by academics such as Mustafa K. Anuar and Wong Kok Keong on election reporting confirmed the trend of the mainstream media.

In his concluding remarks from the media monitoring initiative for the 12<sup>th</sup> General Elections, Charter 2000 coordinator Mustafa noted that generally the coverage by the mainstream media, as in the past elections, was predictably biased towards the incumbent BN. CIJ executive director Gayathry Venkiteswaran observed that not only the reports were lopsided, the way the media magnified the threats by the BN to the electorate revealed the extent to which the media themselves were willing to play up the BN agenda. The people's rejection of the BN on March 8 was also a rejection of the mainstream media.

Mustafa noted that in their attempt to please and promote their political masters, their coverage tended to be overtly and overly propagandistic at times.

“For instance, the 'resurrection' of certain writers/journalists to do glowing write-ups of the BN was too obvious. In the case of the NST, you got certain personalities of the past, like Dr. Kamal Salih, Kalimullah Hassan, etc. writing in columns, singing praises of the BN. In a sense, these personalities were meant to give a direct or indirect endorsement of the incumbent coalition, apart from aiming to have these columns and writings lend the newspaper concerned a stamp of respectability to a certain degree.”

Was there any flicker of hope in this elections? In the last elections, the media monitors concluded that the ntv7 and theSun offered some hope in providing balanced coverage, while the rest were “Cheerleaders” for the BN. Little has changed since then, and maybe even the light of hope was often dampened by the dark forces holding power. The initiative recognises that the media face insurmountable challenges in the form of legal and political controls, but is concerned that the overall effect is the loss of credibility of the media and the lack of quality information by the readers.

This report summarises the findings from the quantitative monitoring coordinated by CIJ involving six dailies: New Straits Times, The Star, theSun, Utusan Malaysia, Malaysia Nanban and Makkal Osai. The effort is of course incomplete because of the absence of data from Chinese-language dailies and the broadcasters, and area that we hope to improve on by the next elections. We record our appreciation to all volunteers and staff who spent their time doing the analysis and measurements of the news articles, a tedious yet necessary task.

## Summary of results

A total of 3,808 items from six newspapers were measured for their content on elections ranging from news articles, editorials, opinion pieces photographs and letters to the editor. Measurements were made for the dailies a week before nominations but for the purpose of this report, only items during the campaigning period have been included.

Among the three English dailies (all in tabloid sizes), the most pro-BN was The Star with 63.12% of its space dedicated to pro-BN content; it also had the smallest proportion of pro-Opposition stories at 5.5%; its neutral stories took up 31.31% in space. The NST had slightly more space for pro-Opposition stories at 5.9%, and its neutral stories at 33.78%. But the daily was also clearly pro-BN with 60.29% stories in the party's favour. theSun appears to have dedicated more space for neutral stories at 40.87% and just over 16% for stories that could be described as pro-Opposition, though the newspaper was still dominated by pro-BN stories at 42.8%. Clearly the three broadsheets monitored (one Malay language and two Tamil) showed higher story counts and also percentage of space for pro-BN stories. Utusan Malaysia recorded 82.29% space for pro-BN items, while Makkal Osai and Malaysia Nanban had 66% and 70%, respectively. But Makkal Osai had the highest percentage of space for pro-Opposition stories at 23%, Malaysia Nanban recorded 19% and Utusan Malaysia had the lowest of all at a mere 1.89%.

In addition to the obvious bias in the media, it was also observed that little space was given to critically discuss issues like the factors that mattered to the voters including the voices from the Indian community; analysis of the parties' manifestos; the strength of the parties etc. In their place, one would find focus on personalities, superficial analysis of candidates and their issues and little meaningful debate, despite the number of columns and spaces for opinion pieces.

Figure 1: Coverage in % of space by English dailies

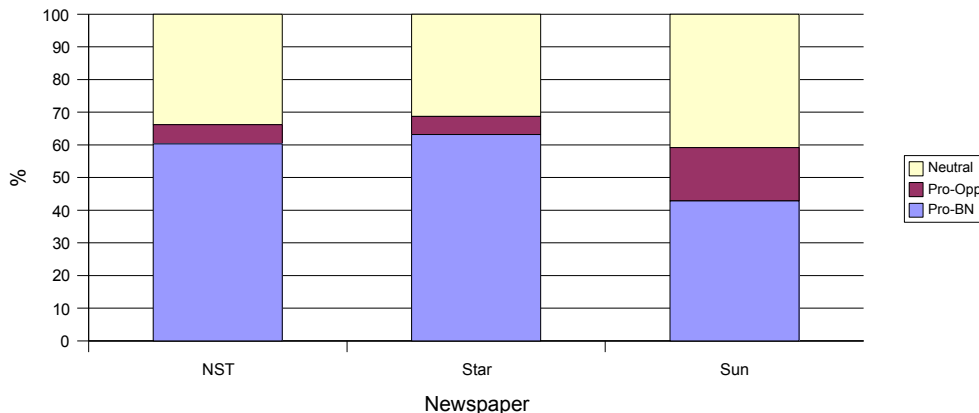
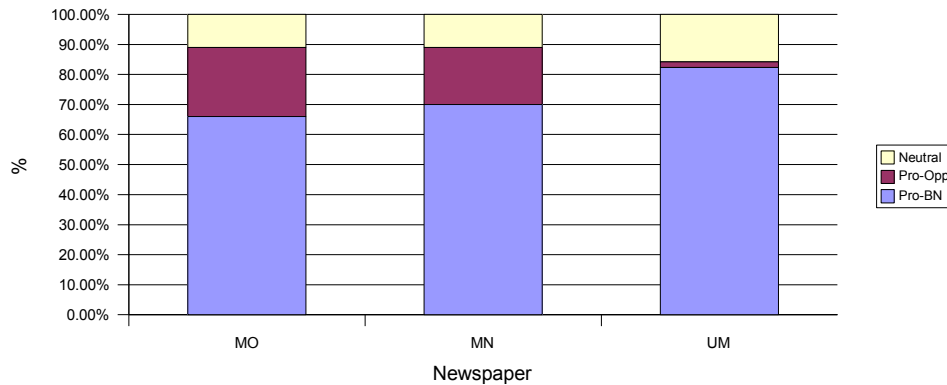


Figure 2: Coverage in % of space in Tamil dailies



### Impact

The impact of the monitoring is left to be seen but the blog received significant visits. Between the period from 24 February to 25 March, the total number of **unique visitors** was **35,218** – the highest was recorded during the polling weekend, and 1,405 hits a day. Three local dailies and several online sites quoted the preliminary results provided as news articles and an editorial, though with their own slants, and a media boss interviewed made references to the study.

### Recommendations

1. Time to go back to basics – an adherence to ethical values and high professional standards is really the first step in improving the media's credibility. Review they should, change they must, but these must hinge on the fundamental role and purpose of journalism. For those who are interested, improvements will require the removal of blocks of old patronage mindsets and passivity in upholding journalistic integrity.
2. Competition is not a bad word – it is time to encourage other publications and media house to flourish to ensure that everyone is kept on their toes. The solution to the "death" of real media may not lie in its anticipated reform, rather, the existing media houses need a bit of competition to constantly check that they are doing justice to the profession. To achieve this, the laws that govern the licencing of them media need to be relaxed while anti-monopoly regulations introduced to create a healthy market of ideas and information.
3. Laws are lawless – any move to restore people's faith in media credibility must not ignore the existence of laws that impede the growth of diverse, plural and credible media. The Printing Presses and Publications Act must go, likewise the Communications and Multimedia Act must be amended to allocate more space and bandwidth to alternative groups to the state and commercial operators that dominate the air space now. Its also time to say goodbye to the Internal Security Act, the Official Secrets Act and the Sedition Act – all that place unfair pressure on the media and journalists. In their place, there are more effective models of

self-regulation that will ensure that rights and responsibility grow hand in hand. The media bosses need to take the challenge to set aside ringgit and sen differences and take on board the task of demanding that these laws be dismantled. The governing parties at the federal and state levels should know it is in their interest to support this move.

**Gayathry Venkiteswaran**  
**Executive Director, Centre for Independent Journalism**  
**on behalf of the organisers of the Media Monitoring Initiative**

## **A. BACKGROUND**

### **1. Background to project**

Volunteers started monitoring the media two elections ago, starting in 1999. Charter 2000-Aliran then compiled the reports of the monitors in a blog during the 2004 general elections, which was the base again for the 12th General Elections this year. This time, it was conducted in cooperation with the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) and the Writers' Alliance for Media Independence (WAMI), all groups focusing on promoting media freedom and independence and with the involvement of volunteers. The analyses were published in a media monitor's diary at <http://www.aliran.com/elections>

This project tracked news coverage in the run-up to the election. The media coverage was assessed against journalism standards in that it should be fair, professional, unbiased and ethical. What this means is that there must be:

- a) equal access to the media for all parties;
- b) fair and sufficient coverage for all parties; and
- c) the right to reply or to respond to state a position or to clarify baseless allegations

To support the qualitative data collected, CIJ began its own quantitative analysis to collect numerical data on the number of stories and space dedicated to the various parties in the election campaign. The objective was to present the coverage of the elections by the local media using quantitative data that could then encourage the media outlets to reassess their practices in election reporting.

### **2. Media issues in Malaysia**

#### ***Ownership and laws***

All of the mainstream media is owned, directly or indirectly, by the ruling coalition or those closely allied to them. Among the big players in the media industry are Media Prima Berhad, Huaren Holdings Sdn Bhd, Utusan Melayu (M) Sdn Bhd, KTS Group of Companies, Media Chinese International Limited, Nexnews Bhd and AMP/Astro.

Together with the state broadcasters, these private media companies openly endorse the ruling coalition and allow their channels to become propaganda tools for the BN, with some exceptions.

In the elections campaign of 1999 following the Asian financial crisis and the political upheaval following the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim, the media was used to create fear among the people that voting the opposition could lead to chaos, a theme repeated in this election, using images of public assemblies calling for free and fair elections and better treatment of marginalised groups.

The ownership structure that favours the BN is strengthened by the existence of strict laws and regulations that control the media. The most draconian include the Printing

Presses and Publications Act, the Official Secrets Act and the Sedition Act. The Internal Security Act, while not actively used against media practitioners, affects free media as it is a tool to curb dissent. Newspapers are burdened annually to apply for their publishing permits and run the risk of not getting them if they have been deemed to have violated the licencing provisions – which could range from critical issues on race and religion, relations between Malaysia and its neighbours, criticisms of local politicians and leaders.

### ***2008 general elections***

The 12<sup>th</sup> general elections was called almost a year before the deadline of March 2009. Unlike the 2004 elections, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi did not have the advantage of the feel good factor and his 'Mr. Nice Guy' reputation that saw him lead an outstanding victory for Barisan Nasional, with 63% popular vote and 91% Parliamentary seats. In the four years of taking power, Abdullah has received massive criticisms from his predecessor Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad over mega projects like the new bridge to Singapore and the role of Pak Lah's son and son-in-law in business and politics; over the AP issue and sale of MV Augusta; and the people's demonstrations through BERSIH and HINDRAF at the end of 2007, among others. The elections were called at a time when resentment was high among many Indians over the government's handling of temple demolitions and growing frustrations over rising prices and cost of living. The 12<sup>th</sup> General Elections on 8 March was also said to be conducted before former deputy prime minister and UMNO deputy president Anwar Ibrahim, now adviser of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, could stand for elections (his is disallowed from contesting or holding positions due to his corruption sentence until April this year).

The results of the elections, where the BN lost its two thirds majority in Parliament, lost four states to the DAP, PKR and PAS and failed to win back Kelantan from PAS was also in many ways a rejection by the people of the messages and propaganda through the mainstream media. The spaces allocated to promote the BN through news, analysis, photos and advertisements became "wasted" because of the rejection by the people of information that is seen as inaccurate, misleading and downright untruthful. In the immediate aftermath of the polls, some media bosses have acknowledged the need for the media to review their content, but this in itself is a gargantuan task considering the 50 years of controls, censorship and self-censorship that has been the practice in the Malaysian media.

### **3. Methodology**

The compilation of data is based on guidelines and to assess the overall impact of the stories to the readers. Analysis for the media monitor's diary was done by a group of volunteers who were assigned specific newspaper or television or radio station. Reports were send to the moderator of the blog to be uploaded. The blog provided spaces for comments from readers.

The first stage was to compute the comparisons in number of stories dedicated to the contesting parties in the elections, on a daily basis. This was then supported by measurements of the space allocated for each story. Measurements were made for news stories, columns, editorials, letters to the editor and photo montages. Each volunteer will use a standard coding sheet to record the headlines, the article subjects, accompanying photos and photo montages the measurements and rating. Advertisements were not tabulated as Transparency International Malaysia has undertaken a specific task to monitor the ad expenditures in 19 media outlets.

For the data collection, six newspapers were monitored and the selection was done based on the limited resources available. The Chinese language media and dailies from Sabah and Sarawak were not included due to a lack of volunteers. Likewise, the focus of the data collection was primarily the newspapers as they were much easier to monitor. However, some data collected by volunteers who monitored ntv7 and Radio24 Bernama will also be included to demonstrate the coverage by broadcasters. Monitoring began a week before nominations (16 Feb) but the analysis and reported will focus on the media coverage during the campaign period up to the polling day.

#### *List of items monitored*

- News - referring to the local stories in the earlier pages of the newspaper
- Business stories
- Metro or regional sections
- Editorials and columns
- Letters to the editor - letters represent the view of readers and the general public, who wrote on various election-related issues, either as rights as voters; expectations of candidates

#### *Definitions*

- 1 Pro-BN stories would include those that portrayed the BN and its component parties and leaders in a way that gives them the advantage in the issues or topics raised. It also included stories that allowed BN individuals to challenge or accuse the opposition parties and individuals, or non-party individuals and organisations that called for support for the BN
- 1 Pro-Opposition stories included those that portrayed the different parties - DAP, Parti Keadilan Rakyat and PAS as well as independent candidates - in a positive light that could influence readers to support them.
- 0 Neutral articles refer to those that give adequate and reasonable space for different parties to respond to an issue or allegation; where the articles contain facts without providing clear persuasions (for example, a report on the launch of a party operations room in a town and where no other statements were made about the candidate, party manifesto, or issues at hand); and those that provided analysis

that contained different and even competing perspectives or attempted to provide fair coverage.

#### **4. Margin of error and lessons learnt**

As the monitoring was done with the help of volunteers, we recognise that there could be some discrepancies and errors particularly in three areas: (1) selection of stories, (2) measurement of the space; (3) rating according to the slant; and (4) representation across languages. All volunteers were briefed to go through the relevant sections in the newspapers - Home/Local/Prime News, Opinion and Forum, Business, Regional/Metro, Letters to the Editor - and identify stories on elections or could be related to election issues.

Based on post-analysis post-mortem, we identified the following gaps and corrective actions:

1) There was discrepancies in the selection of stories, as some did not spell out the connection with the campaigns, yet made mention of certain candidates or were part of a political development that could be interpreted as a campaign initiative. For example, stories on economic performance that quoted the then Finance Minister and Parliamentary candidate for Tasek Gelugor Nor Mohamed Yackop were considered by most of the volunteers even though they did not make mention of the campaign or manifesto. We tried to rectify these as much as we could during the monitoring. It is recommended that more regular checks are done to ensure the selection is standard across the media.

2) A margin of error of about 2% in identifying the slant of the story. This is due to inconsistencies in rating the story according to the three categories (pro-BN, pro-Opposition, Neutral) as some volunteers interpreted the impact of the stories differently. One example is in the stories that quoted the police and independent candidates, where the latter could be interpreted as being an advantage to the BN if they are seen the spoilers for the opposition, or the opposition if they are strong contenders against the BN, or having a neutral impact. In future, all volunteers must be briefed precisely on the categorisation and constantly reviewed to streamline the interpretations.

3) A range of 3-10 cm square in the measurement as a result of the layout, the special Election logos used and space between the headlines and the body of the story.

The second area of discrepancy is a result of the terminology used to describe the stories and the specific categorisation. In using the term Neutral, it gives a misleading impression of the content as some are considered fair coverage, others as factual stories with no bias towards any sides. The team used a simplified categorisation as this was the first attempt and there were inexperienced volunteers. It would be better to have a more stringent list of categories to describe the slant of the stories, for example,

positive/negative for each party; neutral and balanced.

4) One of the limitations in the quantitative exercise was to get adequate representation in terms of the medium and the languages as well as regions. Due to the lack of resources, we were unable to get volunteers to consistently monitor the Chinese-language media and the broadcasters as well as the media in Sabah and Sarawak. However, analyses have been provided though sporadically. In future, there will be more efforts to engage volunteers across the media, language as well as geography.

## B. RESULTS

The media monitors of the 2004 elections [concluded that](#) "other than the very slight exception of ntv7 and theSun, the other media have been clearly quite unfair to the opposition." (20 March 2004, Headline: "The verdict is out: No surprises, mainstream media clearly unfair" – see copy attached). The media coverage of the 12<sup>th</sup> General Elections was not too far off the mark, unfortunately. Statistically, most of the newspapers monitored for quantitative data collection showed very high percentages of pro-BN news and opinion pieces.

### 1. Number of stories and use of space

Story count for the various newspapers showed a high percentage for stories that were pro-Barisan Nasional in the pre-election reporting. This was also translated into the amount of space allocated for the competing sides. Among the three English dailies (all in tabloid sizes), the most pro-BN was The Star with 63.12% of its space dedicated to pro-BN content; it also had the smallest proportion of pro-Opposition stories at 5.5%; its neutral stories took up 31.31% in space. The NST had slightly more space for pro-Opposition stories at 5.9%, and its neutral stories at 33.78%. But the daily was also clearly pro-BN with 60.29% stories in the party's favour. theSun appears to have dedicated more space for neutral stories at 40.87% and just over 16% for stories that could be described as pro-Opposition, though the newspaper was still dominated by pro-BN stories at 42.8%. Clearly the three broadsheets monitored (one Malay language and two Tamil) showed higher story counts and also percentage of space for pro-BN stories. Utusan Malaysia recorded 82.29% space for pro-BN items, while Makkal Osai and Malaysia Nanban had 66% and 70%, respectively. But Makkal Osai had the highest percentage of space for pro-Opposition stories at 23%, Malaysia Nanban recorded 19% and Utusan Malaysia had the lowest of all at a mere 1.89%.

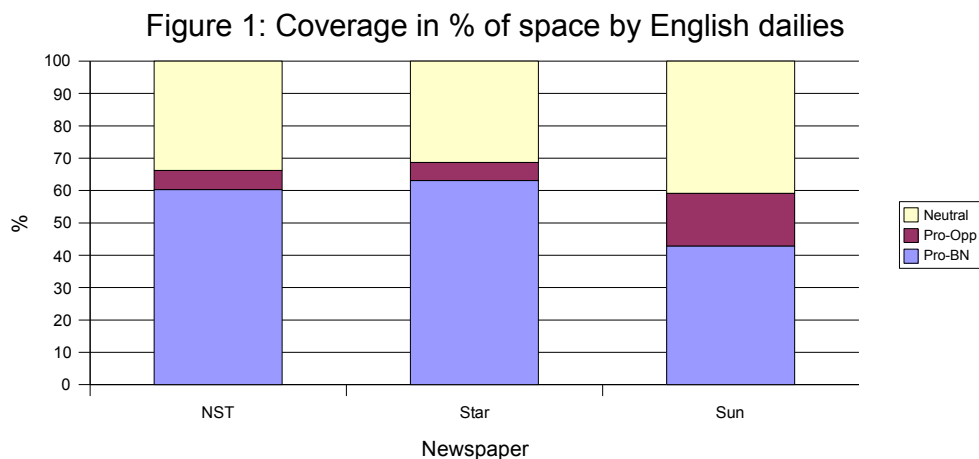
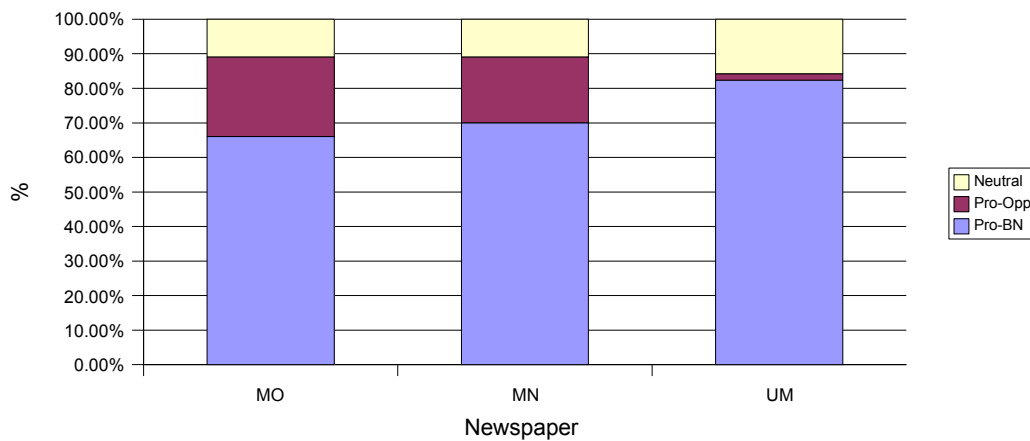


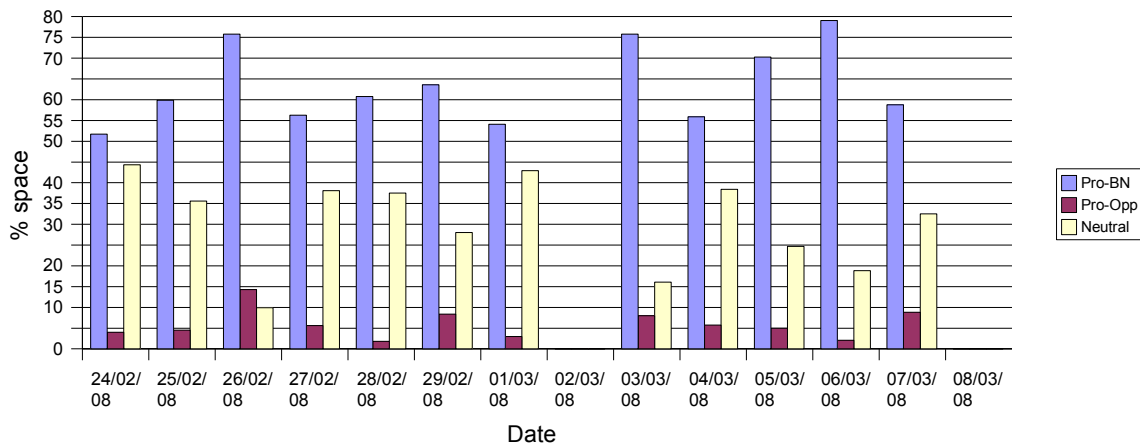
Figure 2: Coverage in % of space in Tamil dailies



The Star

The Star had a total of 638 stories and columns on the elections for the two weeks between 24/2 and 7/3 and excluding 2/3. Of these, 417 or 65.36% were pro-BN, 59 or 9.25% were pro-Opposition and 162 (25.39%) that were neutral. In terms of space for the stories and columns, this is translated to 63.12% space in cm square for pro-BN, 5.56% pro-Opposition and 31.31% neutral. Figure 3 shows the slant in terms of space for the two-week period.

Figure 3: Slant in coverage, The Star 24/2 - 7/3



Some exceptions to note are between 5/3 and 7/3, when the percentage of space for the pro-BN stories were much higher than the percentage of space allocated and lower percentage in space for the pro-Opposition ones. See Figures 4.1 – 4.3.

Figure 4.1: Percentage count vs space in The Star for Pro-BN stories, 5/3 - 7/3

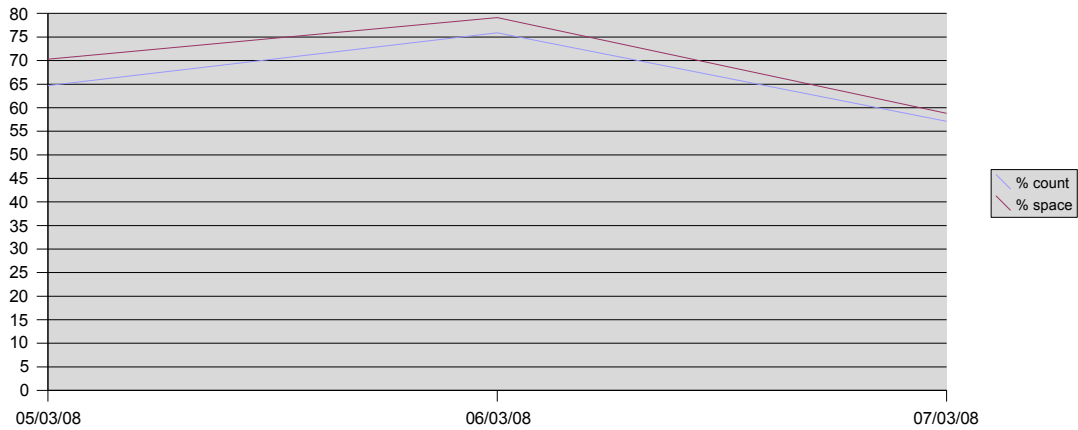


Figure 4.2: Percentage count vs space in The Star for Pro-Opposition stories, 5/3 - 7/3

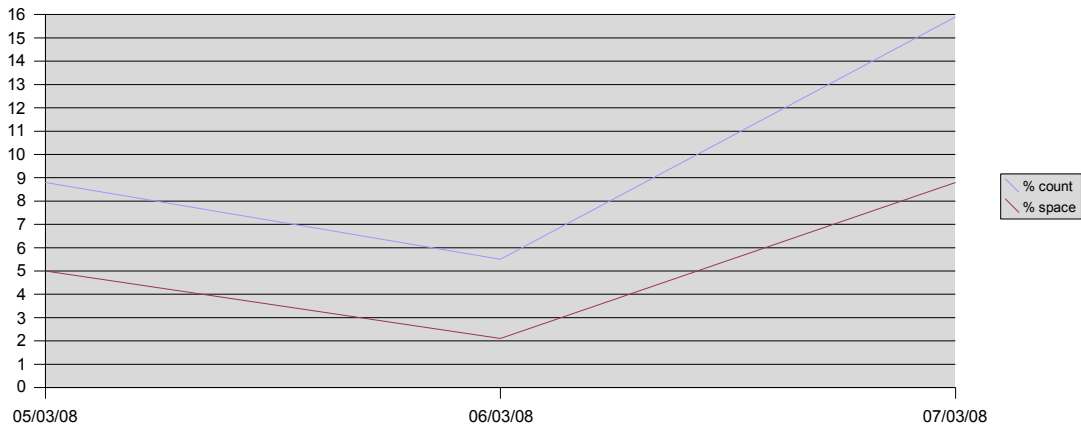
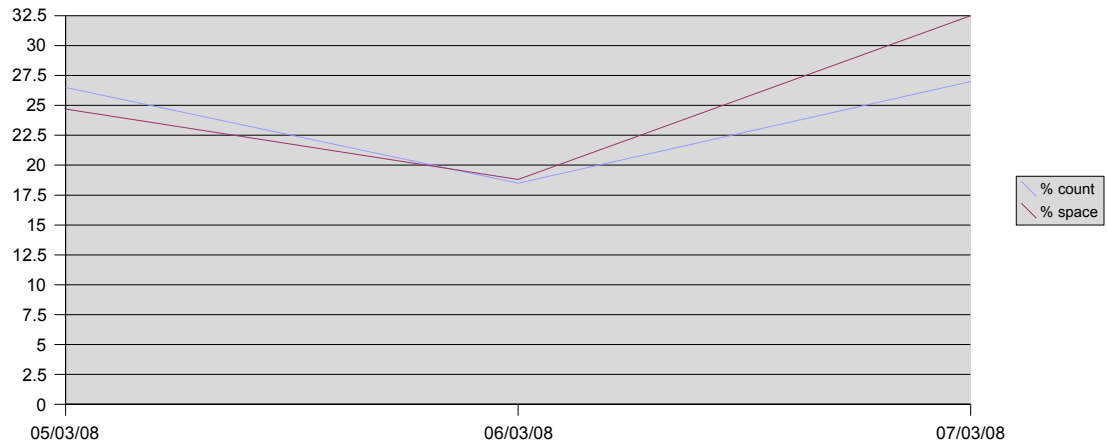
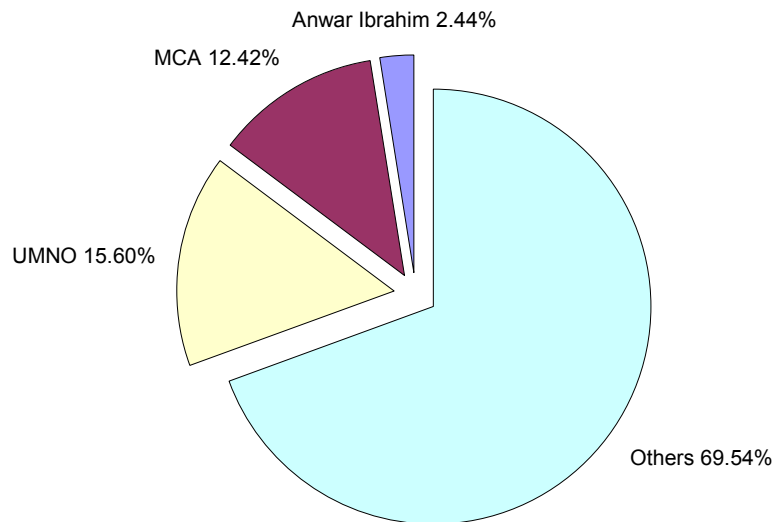


Figure 4.3: Percentage count vs space in The Star for Neutral stories, 5/3 - 7/3



The Star, which is owned by Huaren Holdings, the investment arm of the MCA allocated about 13% of its space on election stories on the party leaders and candidates, compared with 15.6% for UMNO (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Coverage of MCA and UMNO, The Star



## New Straits Times

The NST had a total of 734 stories and columns on the elections for the two weeks between 24/2 and 8/3. Of these, 409 or 55.72% were pro-BN, 62 or 8.45% were pro-Opposition and 263 (35.83%) that were neutral. In terms of space for the stories and columns, this is translated to 60.29% space in cm square for pro-BN, 5.92% pro-Opposition and 33.78% neutral. Figures 6 and 7 show the slant in terms of space for the two-week period.

Figure 6: Overall space and story count, NST 24/2 - 8/3

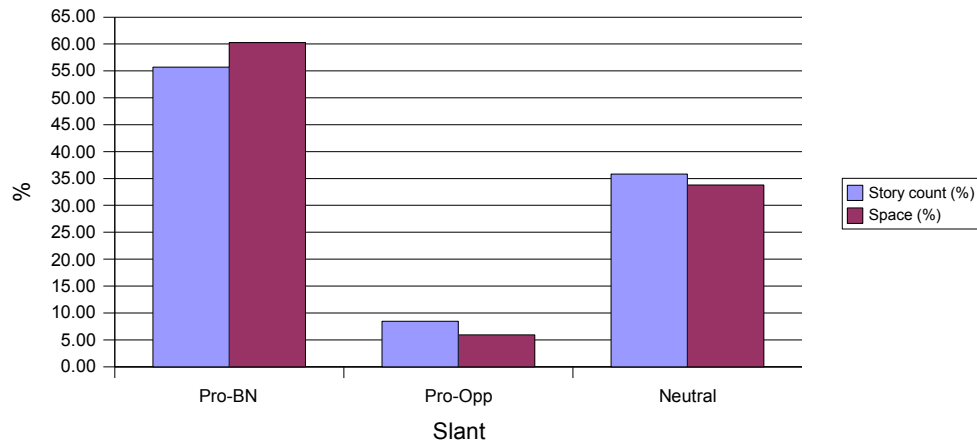
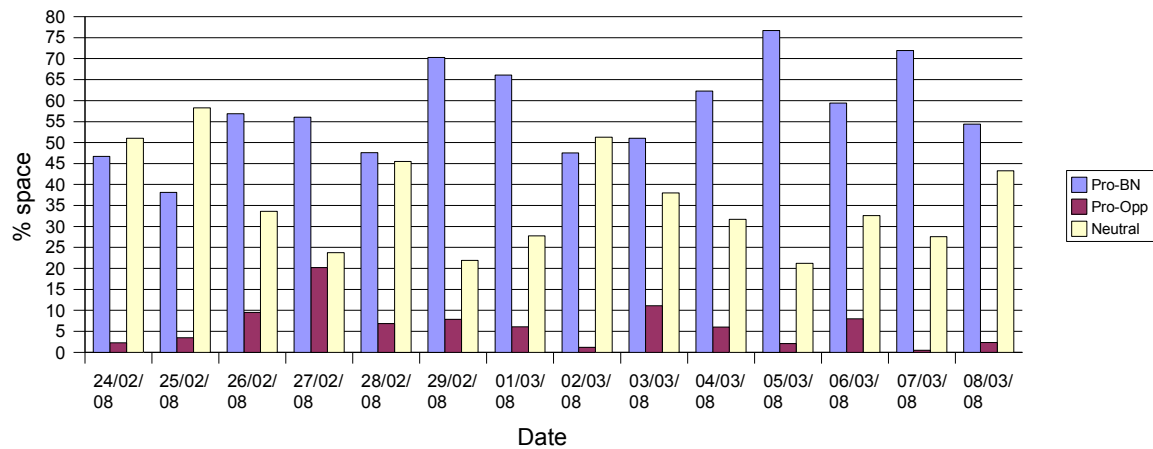


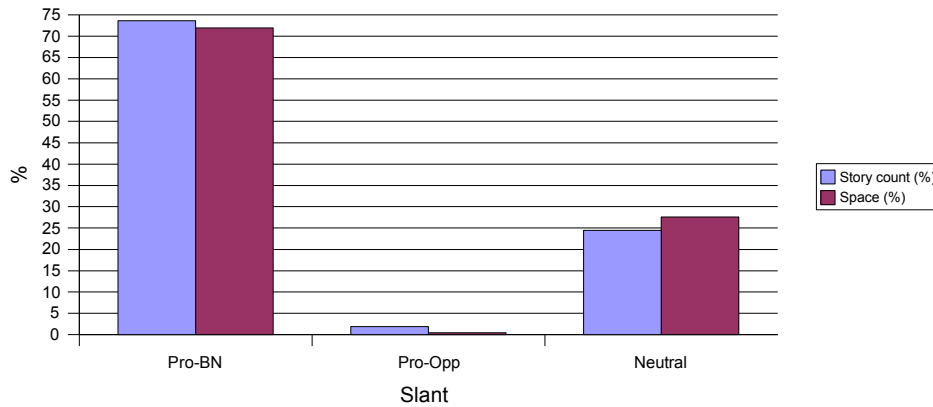
Figure 7: Slant in coverage by NST, 24/2 - 8/3



Throughout the period of the campaign, the newspaper maintained more space for pro-

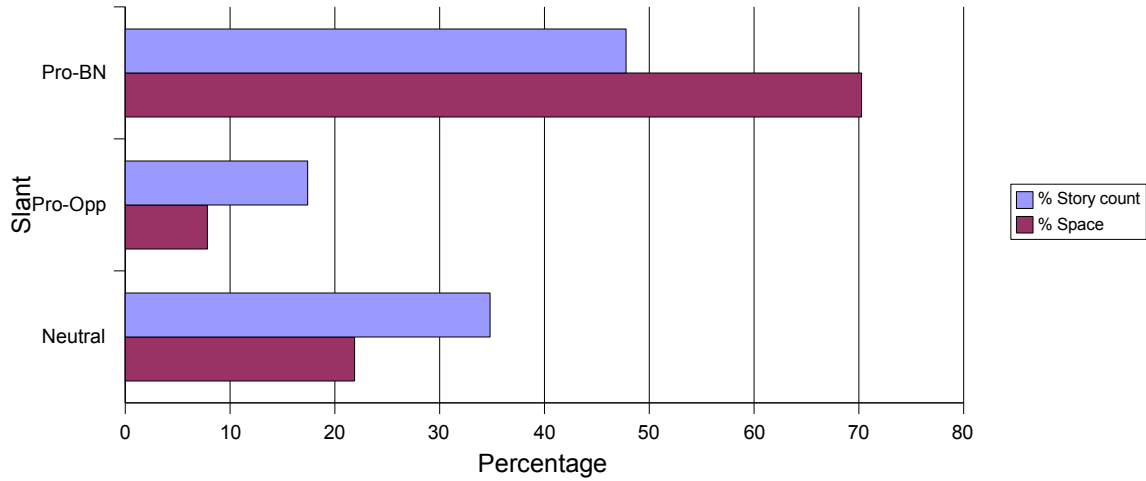
BN stories, with the peak on 5 March where these stories took up 76.72% space of all election related items. The non-BN side did not get significant space that were positive to them, the highest being 20% on 27/2. Its least in terms of number and space occurred on 7/3 when there was only 1 out of 53 stories that could be described as having a pro- Opposition impact. The story, on Anwar Ibrahim defending his position against accusations thrown by Chandra Muzaffar, and other BN leaders took up only 46 cm square (0.46%) as against the 485 cm square (4.8%) that quoted others from Pak Lah to Mahathir Mohamad attacking Anwar. See Figure 8.

Figure 8: Breakdown for NST, 7/3



One day that saw a significant skew in the number and the space occurred on 29 Feb where the 48.9% of 45 items that were pro-BN took 70.27% of the total space. The 8 items that were pro-Opposition or 17.8% of the story count took up only 7.85% of the space. The stories were on pages 8 where it was located at the bottom of the page; p13 where it was the second story and clearly overshadowed by a full piece on BN candidate Shahrizat Abdul Jalil; p14 as snippets, p18 as the second of two stories and p22 where there were 3 stories. See Figure 9.

Figure 9: Space vs count, NST 29/2



theSun

theSun had a total of 289 stories and columns on the elections for the two weeks between 25/2 and 8/3. Of these, 133 or 46% were pro-BN, 48 or 16.6% were pro-Opposition and 108 (37%) that were neutral. In terms of space for the stories and columns, this is translated to 42.83% space in cm square for pro-BN, 16.29% pro-Opposition and 40.87% neutral. Figures 10 and 11 show the slant in terms of space for the two-week period.

Figure 10: Space vs count, theSun 25/2 - 8/3

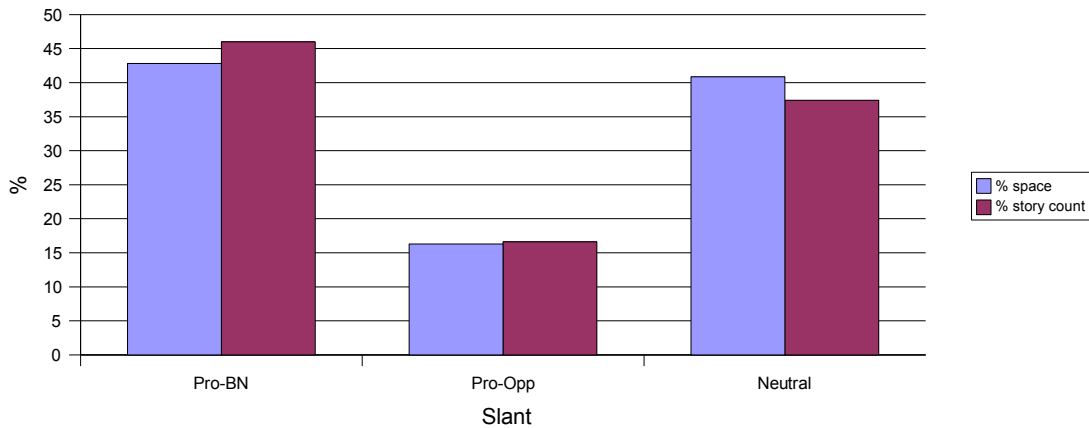
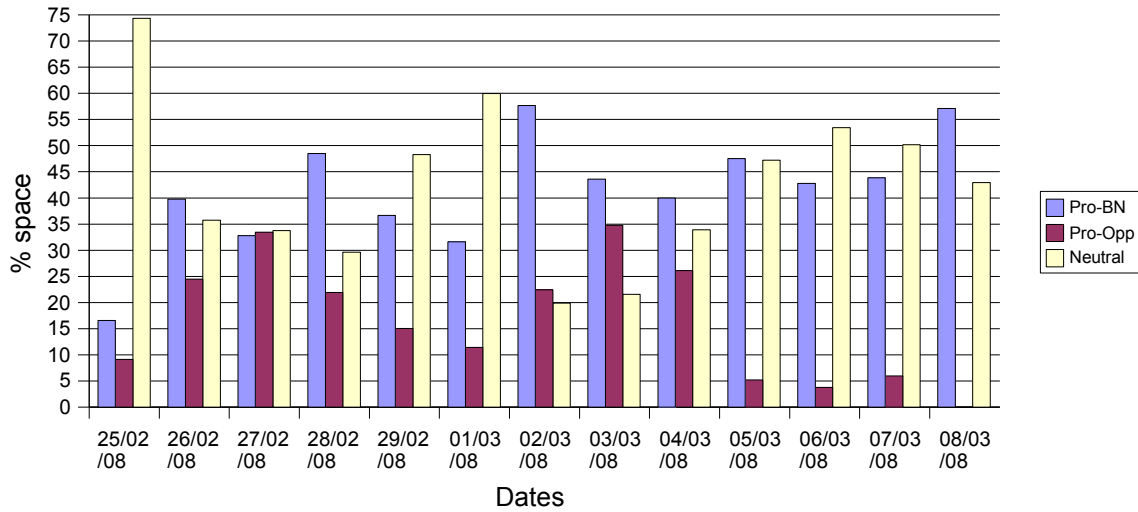


Figure 11: Slant in coverage in theSun, 25/2 - 8/3



On 25 Feb, the high number of neutral stories coincides with the reporting of the nomination process the day before. Most stories introduced the candidates and offered quotes from the contesting individuals. On 26 Feb, despite having only 8.7% of the election content being pro-Opposition, this took up almost 25% of the space, mainly because of a column on voting for fair play that pointed to some of the weaknesses in the ruling party and two letters to the editor that raised questions about the BN. On 1 March, while the story count was in favour of the BN (53.8%) but the space allocated was only 31.63% and neutral stories that made up only 34.6% were given 56.96% space in the newspaper because it had a two-page spread of photographs that showed the different parties during the election campaign. For the pro-Opposition stories, the space was 50:50 text and photographs.

Figure 12: Space vs count, theSun 25/2

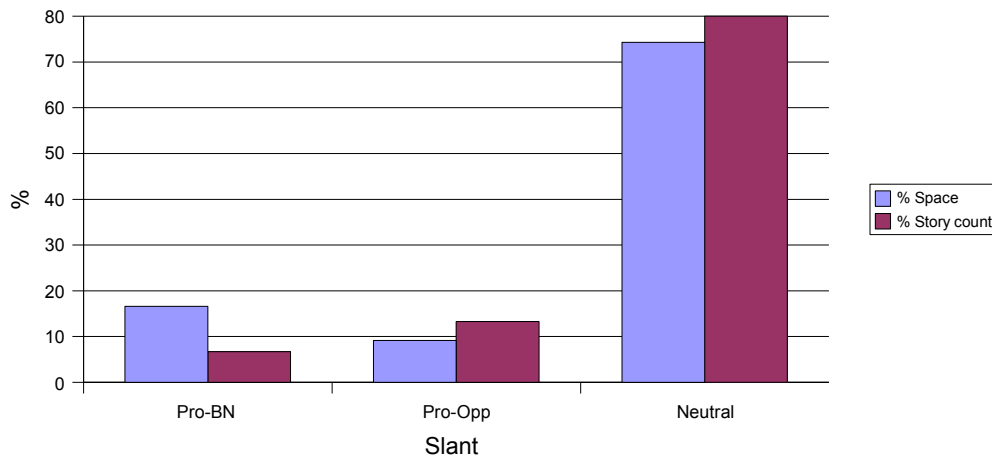
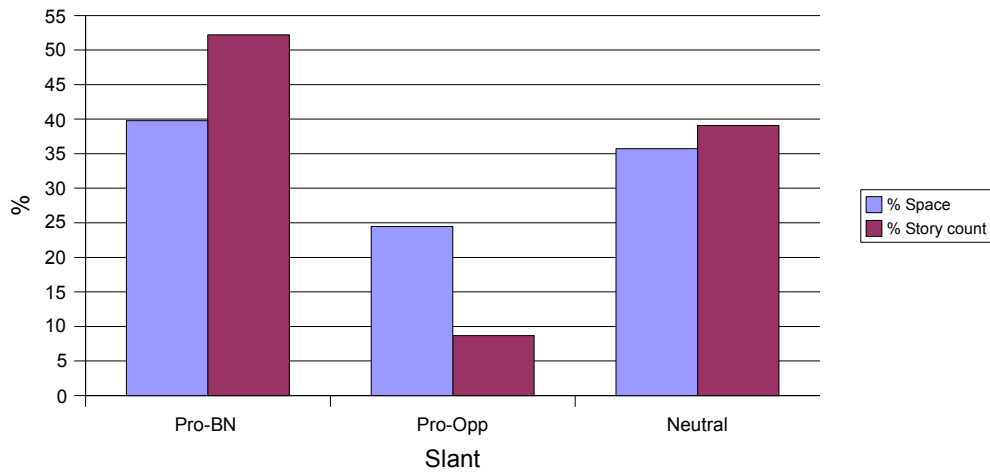
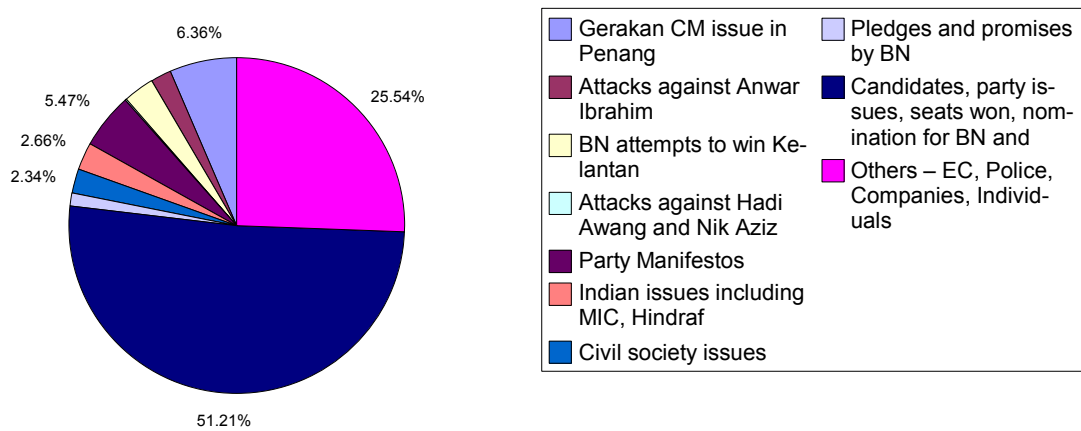


Figure 13: Space vs count, theSun 26/2



Candidates and party personalities took up the most space in theSun, and it spent over 6% on the CM issue in Penang.

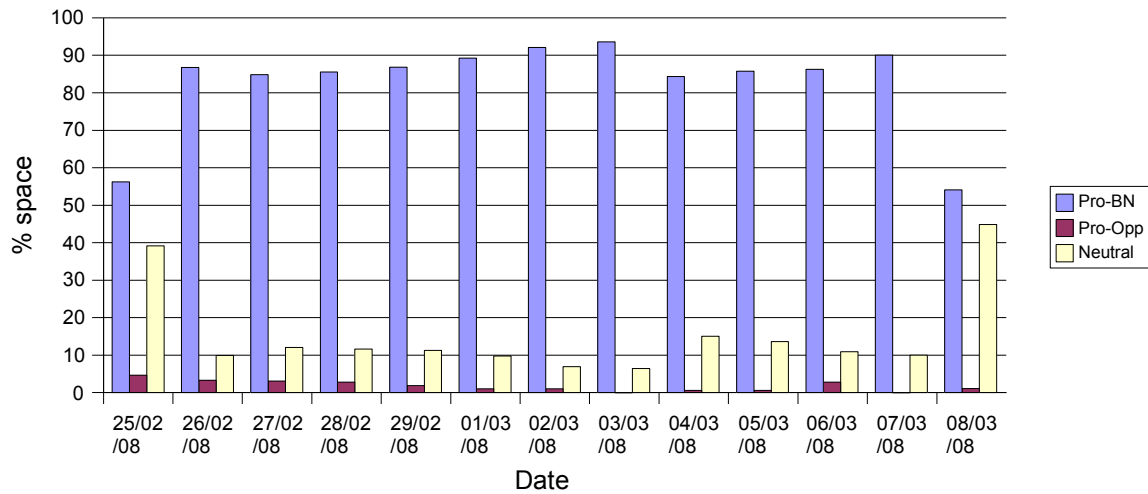
Figure 14: Issues in news coverage, theSun 25/2 - 8/3



## Utusan Malaysia

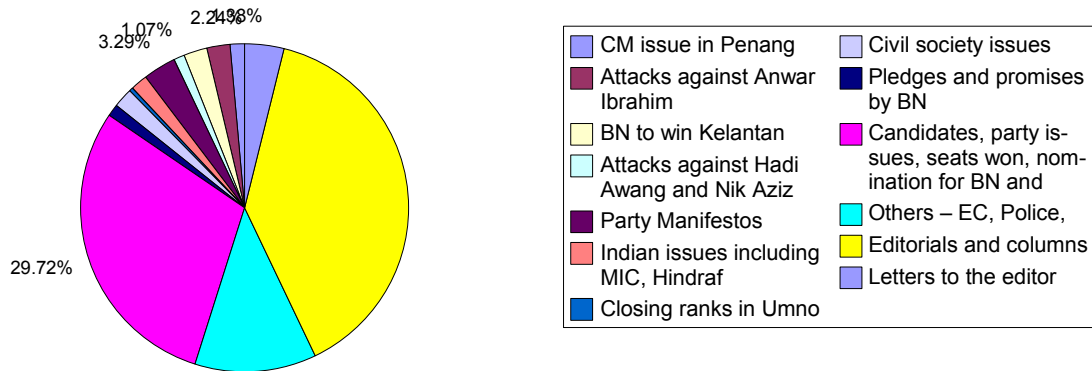
Utusan Malaysia had a total of 981 stories and columns on the elections for the two weeks between 25/2 and 8/3. Of these, 763 or 77.78% were pro-BN, 33 or 3.36% were pro-Opposition and 187 (19.06%) that were neutral. In terms of space for the stories and columns, this is translated to 82.29% space in cm square for pro-BN, 1.89% pro-Opposition and 15.82% neutral. Figure 15 shows the slant in terms of space for the two-week period.

Figure 15: Slant in coverage by Utusan Malaysia, 25/2 - 8/3



Like the rest of the media, most of the space was dedicated to candidates and personalities that took up almost 30% of the total space for election stories. Certain individuals from the opposition were shown in the negative, namely Anwar Ibrahim and the two PAS leaders, Tuan Haji Nik Aziz Nik Mat and Datuk Seri Hadi Awang, totalling 3.3% of the space. This is equivalent to the space given to discussions on party manifestos (elaborated below). Almost 43% of the space was in the form of editorials, columns and letters to the editor, where almost all were pro-BN in their tone and impact.

Figure 16: Breakdown of hot issues covered, Utusan Malaysia



Utusan Malaysia too recorded higher neutral stories on the last of the campaigning days, breaking the convention of its pro-BN coverage since nomination day. It also had fewer anti-opposition stories. This, however, was due to a shift in focus whereby the content reflected the preparation of the Election Commission for polling day. Also, most of the BN leaders covered were united in their D-Day message - appealing for voter turnout and to vote wisely, instead of hard-selling the party. The front page story became a sort of final statement without the usual format of a news piece- “Kuasa di tangan rakyat”. It appealed to the voters to use their votes rationally, predicted the BN winning the two-third majority on the basis of its past election performance and gave an overview of the preparation of the EC.

### Makkal Osai

Makkal Osai had a total of 557 stories and columns on the elections for the two weeks between 24/2 and 8/3. Of these, 358 or 64% were pro-BN, 139 or 25% were pro-Opposition and 60 (11%) that were neutral. In terms of space for the stories and columns, this is translated to 66% space in cm square for pro-BN, 23% pro-Opposition and 11% neutral. Figures 17 and 18 show the slant in terms of space for the two-week period.

Figure 17: Slant in coverage by Makkal Osai, 24/2 - 8/3

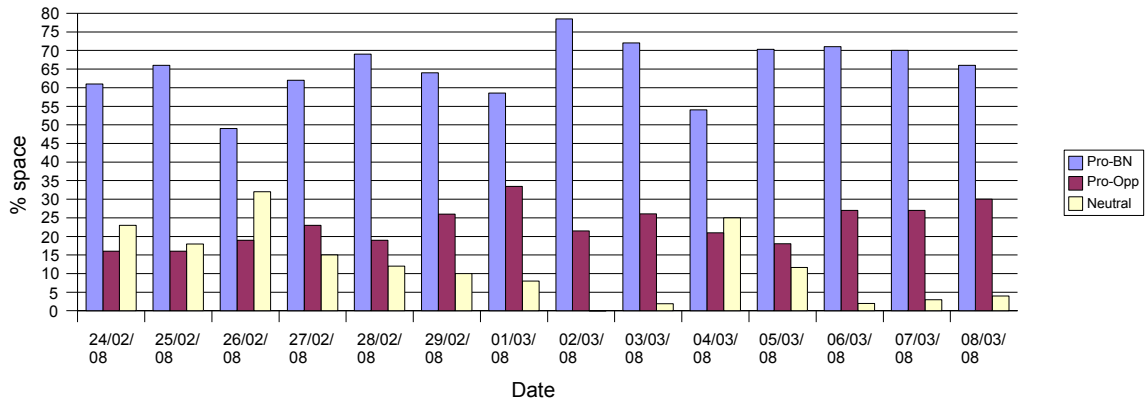
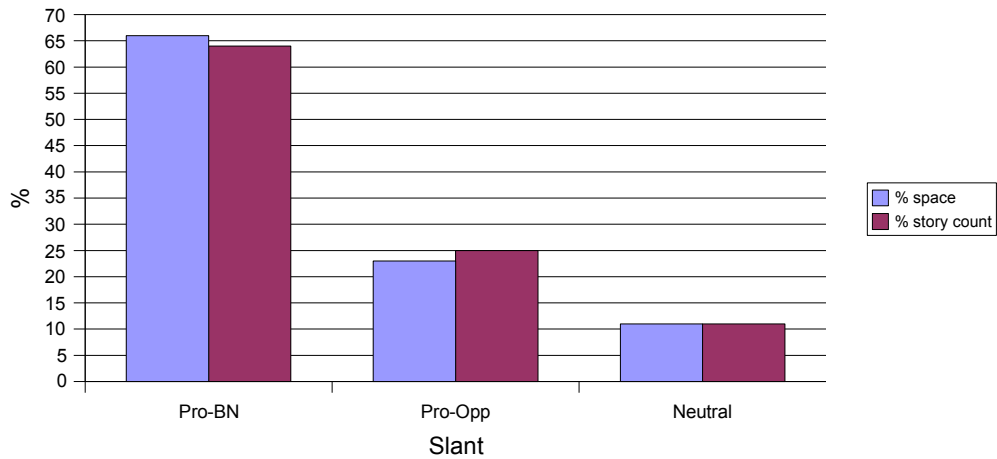


Figure 18: Space vs count, Makkal Osai, 24/2 - 8/3



### Malaysian Nanban

Malaysia Nanban had a total of 609 stories and columns on the elections for the two weeks between 24/2 and 8/3. Of these, 413 or 68% were pro-BN, 131 or 21% were pro-Opposition and 65 (11%) that were neutral. In terms of space for the stories and columns, this is translated to 70% space in cm square for pro-BN, 19% pro-Opposition and 11% neutral. Figures 19 and 20 the slant in terms of space for the two-week period.

Figure 19: Slant in coverage, Malaysia Nanban, 24/2 - 8/3

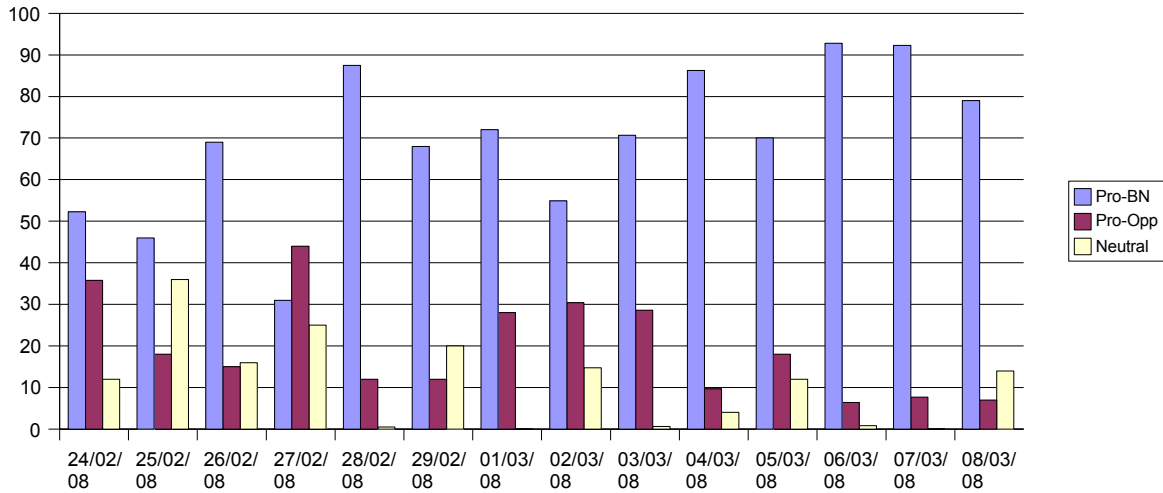
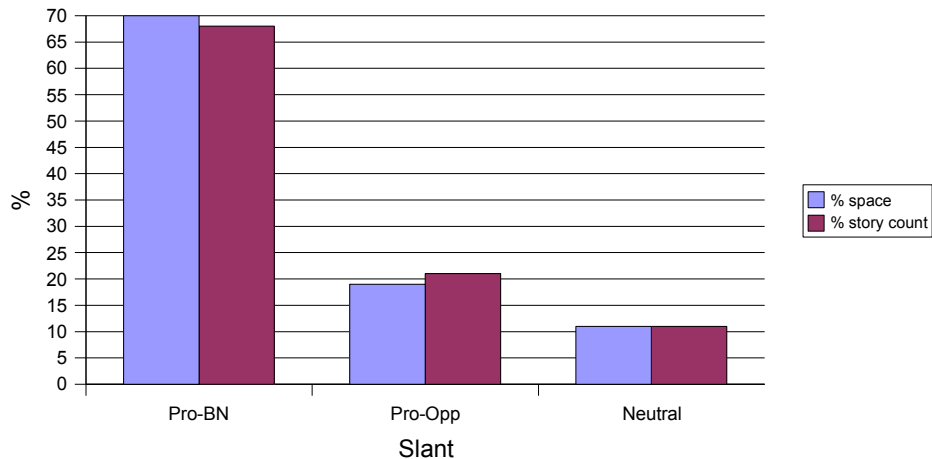


Figure 20: Space vs count, Malaysia Nanban 24/2 - 8/3



Makkal Osai has yet to receive its publishing permit for 2008. Despite its reputation of being critical, the election reporting, like Malaysia Nanban suffered in terms of proportion of the bias towards the BN, where full pages were sometimes dedicated to the BN. However, they had the highest percentage of space for pro-Opposition stories compared to the other media.

### Radio and TV

Due to limited resources, the monitoring of the TV and radio were inconsistent and the sample size was much smaller compared to the newspapers. The two that were monitored were ntv7 and Radio 24 Bernama.

## Ntv7

Of the eight days monitored, there was a total of 100.2 minutes of election news during the 8pm news broadcast. Out of this, almost 60% of the content was pro-BN, 9.6% pro-Opposition and 30.4% neutral. Figures 21 and 22 show the breakdown of the coverage according to slant and on a daily basis. While maintaining the top spots for BN leaders, namely Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Najib Abdul Razak, the station provided some coverage of the opposition whereby candidates could state their points, and party leaders like Lim Guan Eng and Nik Aziz Nik Mat got 1 minute each in challenging some of the comments made by BN reps. Among other opposition leaders who got air time were Jeff Ooi, R. Sivarasa, Elizabeth Wong, Nurul Izzah, Dr Lo' Lo' Ghazali and Teresa Kok. However, these were lower in the ranks of the stories and got no more than 1 minute each in shared time with the BN opponents.

Figure 21: Coverage by ntv7, 8 days between 24 Feb and 4 March

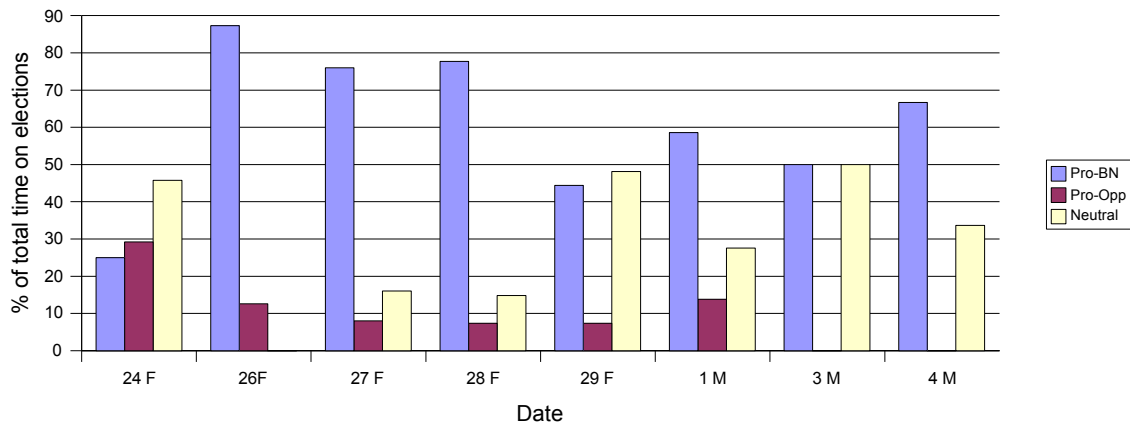
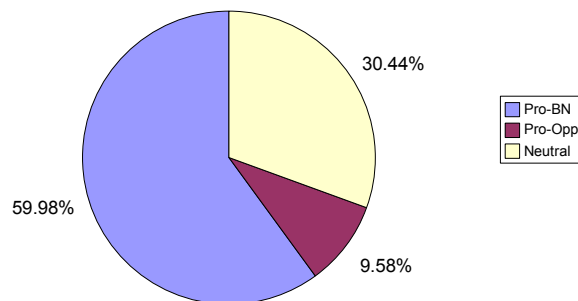


Figure 22: Overall coverage by ntv7



The media monitor was however critical about the coverage by ntv7 of Nurul Izzah and noted the following:

"Sharizat, the Lembah Pantai BN candidate and a frequent 'ego tripper', appeared on the streets of the constituency, meeting a crowd of 'lower income' electorate. She never fails to take the opportunity to use the media to her best advantage. Despite being a famous politician and incumbent Minister, she still felt the need to boost her own confidence by singing her own praises, publicly listing all she claimed to have done for these constituents. It is a wonder that someone so famous for her service to the people should have to do that for the benefit of people who already know about it and allegedly benefited from her service.

Her opponent, Nurul Izzah Anwar, daughter of PKR adviser Anwar Ibrahim, had a far simpler line for voters, saying she was committed to serving the people, if given the chance to do so. ntv7 in its usual partisan manner, commented, "Few expect the young woman to unseat the minister, at least for now..."

Perhaps, our 'feel good' channel felt a momentary 'pang' of sympathy, for this young first-timer, or a twinge of guilt at being obviously biased towards the BN in much of its reporting."

This posting received a comment from a journalist and the point is noted as well:

Anonymous said...

It wasn't 'a momentary 'pang' of sympathy' or 'a twinge of guilt at being obviously biased towards the BN'.

Have you any idea how tight the leash is on us? Spare a thought for those of us in the newsroom who are fighting within the system, to try to squeeze in as much 'fair' coverage as we can get away with.

4:06 PM

[Gayathry V said...](#)

To the 2nd anonymous poster, its good to get your feedback. Obviously you're a journalist. It should be clear that individual journalists are not the target of the monitors, but the whole approach of editors, owners and the BN in framing the issues. We would appreciate specific cases of pressure that exist in the newsroom so that we can highlight to the public the constraints within which the journalists work and find ways to mitigate them.

6:25 PM

Anonymous said...

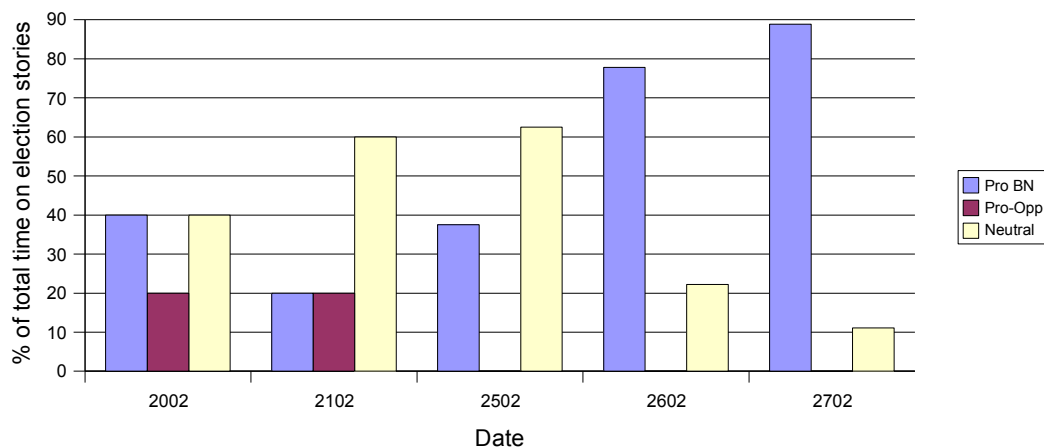
simple - either we adhere to the imposed ratio of positive bn news to opposition coverage, or lose our broadcasting licence and have everyone's jobs at stake, editors not excluded.

7:16 PM

## Radio 24 Bernama

This radio station was launched on the eve of Merdeka in 2007 and is the only 24-hour news station. Unlike the sister stations under RTM, Radio 24 broadcasts (frequency 93.9FM) only news and talk shows, with no advertisements or commercial play for music. The station was monitored for its 1pm and 4pm news bulletins. It was interesting to monitor the radio station in the run up to the nomination day and polling day, as it attempted to provide some kind of balance to the issues and parties. Again, it was overwhelmingly pro-BN, but there were news slots that had sound bites from opposition leaders. Unfortunately, as polling day approached, the trend fell into the same pattern of state media and even the private media where most of the content favoured or emphasised the strength of the BN. A sample of the data for 20 and 21 Feb, and between 25 and 27 Feb showed how the pro-opposition items fell out of the radar. There were some attempts to get comments from academics, with some providing good reviews and analysis, but never as the top stories. Likewise, where the opposition from DAP and PKR were quoted, they did not make the top items, which seemed to have been reserved for the BN leaders. Competitors for the first three items included the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister as well as state BN leaders, and the EC Chairman.

Figure 23: Coverage in Radio24 pre and post-nomination



## 2. Analysis of content and issues

What did the newspapers talk about during the election campaign? The bulk of the stories concentrated on personalities – the candidates, responding to statements by others, personal aspects like the support from family members for the candidates etc. Some of the positive exceptions came in the form of a series of questions to the contesting candidates provided by theSun and focusing on the issues confronting candidates in selected areas, published in The Star's Metro section.

Some major issues that could have been expected in the media included:

- Conflict within UMNO in states like Terengganu, Perlis
- The CM issue in Penang
- Frustrations of the Indian community over various issues
- Rising cost of living
- Corruption
- Reforms in the BN in governance and transparency

But few of these took centre stage except the CM issue in Penang. References to the Hindraf were in less than 3% of the space across the media, while problems in the UMNO were reflected largely as personality issues with limited analysis. Below is a selection of issues as covered by the different media. A note is also made about the coverage of the non-BN parties.

### 2.1 Party manifestos

Manifestos are an important aspect of the elections as parties and candidates document their pledge to voters and the general public. It is a statement of how the party proposes to address the many issues facing the nation and the population, from the economy to social welfare, security etc. However, the media spent very little time or space on analysing the manifestos presented by the contesting parties. Most attention was given to the list of issues in the manifesto, and the BN parties were reported as defending their strengths and criticising the manifestos of the opposition. Without sufficient room for debate and reply, the impression given was that the BN manifesto was a grand plan and that anything from the opposition was bound to fail. For example, PAS's welfare state concept and the pledge to reduce fuel prices made by PKR and DAP were described as resulting in bankrupting the nation. In comparing the newspapers, theSun had 4.89% of its space on the party manifestos while the Utusan Malaysia had 3.29% of its total space.

Looking at the little analysis on the party manifestos, on 27 Feb, Wan Hamid Hamid in his NST column (“DAP's secret ambition or a tall tale?”) asked if DAP's manifesto was realistic. He started by giving space to two DAP candidates to explain their case, while casting doubts by throwing in impressive figures on economic performance figures from the BN. But he made a point in the closing paragraphs that some people have been cynical of manifestos from both sides of the divide and noted a UK case where the

government's lawyer said election pledges were not subject to legitimate expectation. In the page before Zainul Ariffin said in "Money promises won't do the trick" that the opposition parties were being unreasonable in their manifestos and that he would rather "hear an opposition that argues the old line of checks and balances, than one that tries to sell me fairy tales." By writing "Politicians should respect voters' intelligence more, and maybe they will be surprised" it sounded as though it could have been a call to the BN as well. The NST's editorial on the same day ("Manifesto destiny") concluded that the BN's manifesto was more achievable given its report card, and the opposition's was merely wishful thinking. The only attempt to analyse the manifestos was in a 28 Feb article ("How the manifestos measured up") that quoted different academic and corporate sources on the manifestos. While overwhelmingly giving credit to the BN, some important questions were raised for all parties as well.

theSun made a stand on the issue the same day under the headline "A manifesto is a commitment" by arguing that the BN had much work to do to support the manifesto with strong post-election commitment and pledge especially in fighting corruption and improving multi-ethnic relations. The daily published an analysis by economist Prof Emeritus Dr Mohamed Ariff on 1 and 2 March, in which he argued the case for the removal of subsidies and barriers to competition. Though not directly commenting on any manifestos, the pieces could be seen as timely to support the BN strategy to cut fuel subsidies.

Utusan's approach to the manifesto, both in the editorial and a column was to endorse the manifesto and reject the opposition's pledges. The editorial asked: "Apa lagi bukti yang diinginkan rakyat mengenai kemampuan BN menerajui negara berbanding pembangkang. Adakah ini semua mampu diberikan oleh pembangkang melalui janji-janji manis mereka?" (*What other evidence is needed for the citizen to be convinced of the ability of the BN to lead the nation. Can the opposition provide all these with their sweet promises?*). Noraini Abd Razak in her opinion piece on page 10 ("Bukan sekadar berjanji") affirmed the editorial with arguments like:

"Malah jika dibuat perbandingan antara manifesto 2008 dan 2004, elemen paling ketara ialah BN sentiasa konsisten dalam usaha mengejar matlamat-matlamatnya membela kebajikan rakyat dan memartabatkan Malaysia di mata dunia." (*If we compared the two manifestos from 2008 and 2004, the most obvious element is the consistency in pursuing the objectives in public welfare and raising Malaysia's name in the eyes of the world.*)

"Segala-galanya dibuktikan dengan fakta dan angka supaya tiada pihak dapat mempersoalkannya serta mendakwa mampu menawarkan pelan pembangunan yang lebih baik." (*All are proven with facts and figures so that no one can question them or claim that they can offer better in terms of development plan.*)

Yet, no one provided an intelligent analysis of the BN's manifesto and report card with

facts and figures, with the [exception](#) of online sources like Malaysiakini.com. In dealing with issue of prices where the BN had put out large advertisements comparing Malaysia's prices of core items, The Star's [interactive blog section](#) provided an idea of how the public viewed such messages.

## 2.2 BN promises and threats

In addition to the advertisements placed by the BN in the newspapers, news pages also published promises and pledges by the parties (aside from the party manifestos) where the respective leaders made announcements for projects and grants. For example, on 29 Feb, the newspapers reported that Pasir Puteh in Kelantan would get a RM24 million Islamic complex and on 1 March, Najib Abdul Razak's announcement of RM339 million for vernacular schools allocated under the Ninth Malaysia Plan. Other pledges were also made in terms of building new schools, more grants for Kelantan in BN won and other items.

Of the entire space dedicated to the elections, theSun published just over 1% on promises and pledges by the BN, although it published on average two to three BN ads daily during the campaign period. Similarly in the Utusan Malaysia, 1.19% of the content featured BN's promises, while the figures were higher in the two Tamil dailies with 4% (Makkal Osai) and 6% (Malaysia Nanban), where attempts were made to promise goodies for the Indian community. The space may appear small, but this has to be seen in context of the overall access by the BN to advertisement space and other opportunities through the print, broadcast, outdoor and other media.

Writing on the advertisements placed by the BN, the media monitors noted:

“On the eve of polling day (7 March 2008), Malaysian newspapers stepped up the number of advertisements to “persuade” voters to cast their ballots for Barisan Nasional. Although the reporting trend has generally been in favour of the BN, the ads have also been generously displayed.”

“Barisan Nasional reportedly spent just over RM1 million in print advertising alone, according to corruption watchdog agency Transparency International-Malaysia (TI) and a 28 February *Malaysiakini* report.”

“Just when you thought you would be safe from the BN propaganda onslaught, you log into your Hotmail or Yahoo account to catch up on your emails - and lo and behold, Big Brother is waiting for you there with more BN adverts!”

The tone taken by the BN and promoted by the media was the "threat" of bad things to come if the BN was not voted in. The media monitors noted these threats in their postings:

*"The Borneo Post and The Daily Express* have carried reports effectively warning voters that they risk losing development grants in their areas if they vote for the opposition

This was a line in a *Daily Express* report: "Should the opposition win a seat in the coming election, (Sabah Chief Minister) Musa said he would not even want to see the opposition Assemblyman if the latter went to see him."

Another one on ntv7:

"As polling day draws nearer, the Barisan Nasional has apparently stepped up its hard-sell in various ways, including alleging that Opposition parties are trying to rig elections by purchasing indelible ink, employing Mat Rempit to harass candidates, and will cause trouble in the aftermath of the elections, if they win.

7Edition's news bulletin yesterday, abandoning their 'feel good', 'look good' image broadcasted these implicit threats and allegations wholesale. There was no attempt to disguise the fact that ntv7 was for all intents and purposes a BN mouthpiece."

The strongest message must be the front page of the NST on 7 March "Don't silence yourself, No representation, No Voice and Kalimullah Hassan's piece "Dancing with wolves".

### **2.3 Personalities supporting BN campaign**

The media also highlighted support and endorsement of personalities and companies for the candidates, where the presence of such individuals like singer Siti Nurhaliza, gives a story a higher news value. As the writer of one such story aptly said in her introduction "It is rare to see corporate figures out campaigning for political parties" ("Air Asia boss: Work within the system to bring changes", NST 7 March, page 22).

On 29 February, NST carried a 323cm square photo story of Siti Nurhaliza Tarudin showing support for the Taman Templer state seat, Subahan Kamal, who was reported as a friend of Siti's husband, Mohd Khalid Jiwa. The caption ends with "Siti joined the ranks of other entertainers who are campaigning for both BN and the opposition this general election", but few, if any reports showed personalities campaigning for the non-BN candidates. In the lead up to polling day, NST reported on captains of industry who threw their support behind Lembah Pantai candidate and incumbent Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil. On 7 March, the paper reported AirAsia boss Tony Fernandes and his support for the BN as "changes in the country could come from within the BN government and did not necessarily require the push of the opposition."

Singers Mawi and Betty Banafe also performed for Shahrizat, reported The Star on 4 March (page 14) where both performers were quoted expressing support either for BN or the UMNO woman leader.

On 27 Feb, theSun published a meet-the-people session in Pekan where UMNO deputy president Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak is seen talking to Malaysia's first astronaut Dr. Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor, organised by DRB-Hicom. The Star highlighted on 5 March in its Metro section the support by singer DJ Dave, himself an UMNO member, to several BN candidates.

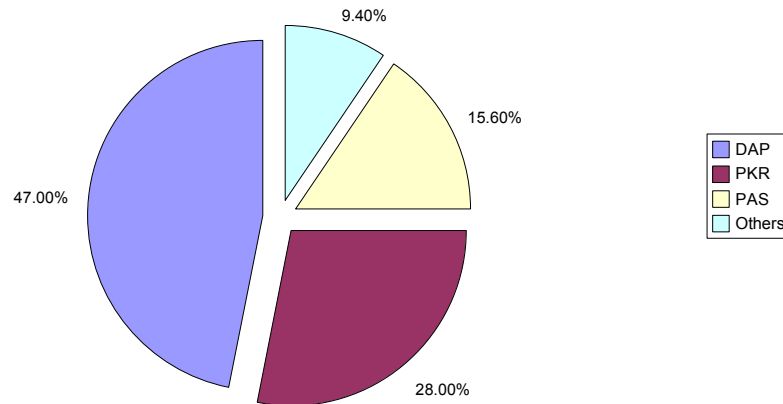
## **2.4 Non-Barisan Nasional parties**

The non-Barisan Nasional parties and candidates represented those from PAS, PKR, DAP, SNAP, PSM, STAR and independent individuals. The trend in reporting these parties and individuals were generally negative. The clearest example in the pre-nomination week was the announcement by Batu Gajah MP Fong Po Kuan, who later changed her mind. The issue was reported by the local media to reflect crisis within DAP, in particular the Perak team following the allocation of seats and rumours that she had to make way for the state leaders. Similarly, opposition leaders from the PAS and PKR were highlighted negatively over their statements and allegations of split in the opposition front.

Throughout the campaign period, 2% of the space in theSun contained statements attacking or criticising PKR adviser Anwar Ibrahim and PAS leaders, Hadi Awang and Nik Aziz Nik Mat, and 3.4% in the Utusan Malaysia. In The Star, attacks against Anwar took up 2.44%, mainly prompted by the public statement by Chandra Muzaffar against PKR.

An analysis was made to look at the space dedicated to the non-BN parties in the NST that were portrayed in a positive light, in which it was shown that the DAP got more space (47%) compared to PKR (28%) and PAS (15.6%). Combined with the newspaper's stand on PKR through its articles especially by Kalimullah Hassan on 5 March ("Anwar's burden not nation's to bear"), it can be assumed that the newspaper is "friendlier" to the DAP.

Figure 24: Coverage for the non-BN parties, NST 24/2 - 8/3



A note by the media monitor on Utusan's treatment of the opposition, in particular PAS:

“When a opposition politician appears on the front page of *Utusan*, chances are not all is well. To date, Abdul Hadi Awang from Pas has appeared thrice, and each time after he was plagued by bad publicity. This time, while the storm over his alleged decline for shaking the hand of his opponent had yet to subside, he was criticised again for his supposed decree for Pas candidates to 'bad mouth' their rivals from BN.”

## 2.5 The Anwar factor

Reports making references to Anwar Ibrahim tended to quote BN leaders or ex-colleagues criticising him and his party. The Tamil dailies and theSun (and one article in The Star) tended to have more positive news on Anwar. The BN had dismissed him as a factor in deciding the election date as Anwar would only be able to stand for elections in April. As explained above, a lot of space was given to those who criticised him, among others Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Mahathir Mohamad, Chandra Muzaffar and S. Nallakaruppan.

Media monitors made the following notes:

“If an alien from another planet were to check out the mainstream media coverage of the general election campaign, he or she would not know that a person by the name of Anwar Ibrahim existed.

It appears that the mainstream media have virtually blacked out the opposition icon from their coverage of the election campaign. Anwar has been instrumental in forging closer cooperation among the various opposition parties and ensuring one-to-one contests.

Some analysts believe the media, especially television stations, have been told not to portray the opposition in a favourable light. Anwar especially appears to be the target of a complete blackout.”

## **2.6 Predictions by the media**

The content of the media coverage could be seen as pointing in several directions:

1. Threats that by voting the Opposition, the people would be voting in chaos and reduce ethnic representation in the Parliament and Cabinet
2. Penang was a tough fight, but then let's fight out who the next Gerakan CM could be
3. Voters could not be read in Penang, it was too quiet to tell
4. A lot of money and pledges for Kelantan, and there were mixed signals about the outcome
5. Dissatisfaction on the selection of candidates among Malay and Indian communities
6. While there was general acceptance that BN would see a reduction in its margin of victory, some writers were indicating tough challenges in Terengganu, Selangor, Perak, Perlis, and Negri Sembilan.

The newspapers did provide predictions on the chances of individuals and the parties in the elections, some better analysed than the others.

In the NST, analysis pieces indicated problems in the different states, some which eventually fell into the Opposition's hands, especially in the week leading to the elections.

In Perak, writer M. Husairy Othman predicted that the BN would lose a parliamentary seat and two state seats to the opposition, but would come out from the elections without much upsets. (8/3, page 16), with no real arguments but quotes from local sources (highly placed BN sources).

In Perlis, Ahmad Fairuz Othman wrote on 7 March that BN would sweep all Parliamentary and state seats despite the rumblings of “protest votes being cast by disgruntled Umno grassroots members” and that the only effect could be a dip in the majority.

In Kedah, Noor Adzman predicted, with information from observers that Kedah BN

could repeat its success from 2004 with a slightly reduced majority “due to lingering negative sentiments against the government.”

Analysis for Terengganu and Negri Sembilan by Rosli Zakaria and Patrick Sennyah raised concerns about the split in the votes, where Patrick noted that “the DAP seems to be the only opposition party capable of denying the BN an opposition-free state assembly.” Based on local sentiments against the decision to drop a number of the UMNO candidates, Rosli wrote that “Although Barisan Nasional has the edge, there are indications that Pas could spring a surprise in the state seats.” He noted also that “Much of the campaign period was used by BN to soothe emotional supporters whose revered leaders were replaced.”

In Kelantan, the NST team wrote on 4 March that the feedback from the BN party workers was that “deprived of development and jobs under Pas rule,” the residents would vote for a change. The visits by UMNO president Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and deputy president Najib Abdul Razak had boosted the campaigning, unlike the Pas camp where they were said to have spread too thin. Most writers responded positively to the naming of Awang Adek as the Menteri Besar candidate for the state, including M. Sahibullah in an article on 7 March in theSun under “Intense battle for Kelantan”.

For the Federal Territory, Eileen Ng reported on 3 March that the DAP was confident of getting two more seats from its previous four in 2004 and speculated that the largely Malay areas would remain in the hands of the BN.

Johniston Bangkuai commented in his analysis on 3 March that the opposition in Sabah faced serious challenges and noted that the real challenge would be in the few Chinese-majority areas where DAP was seen as better than its peers in PKR in canvassing for votes.

On 1 March, a piece in the newspaper (without a byline) noted serious challenges to the BN in Penang and Kelantan but added that “there are rumblings in Perlis because of infighting within BN, but not enough to cause an upset; problems within Perak's Kinta Valley which has traditionally been pro-opposition; and problem seats within Kedah and the Federal Territory.” The paragraph concludes with a positive note for BN: “Even in these states, BN should win the majority at state and parliamentary levels.”

Wan Hamidi Hamid predicted in his comment piece on 1 March that there is less reason for the Malays to vote Pas and PKR because of the absence of “massive discontent with the Barisan Nasional government, Malay voters are expected to stick with the ruling coalition this time.”

In “Why ‘the opposition’ remains a pipe dream”, Dr. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin wrote on 6 March the challenges of the past but indicated that with the serious effort of avoiding internal competition for seats and in responding to urban voters being more independent

with access to information over the internet, there could be indications of a two party system.

TheSun predicted a tough fight with the expectation that the opposition will “inflict a dent in the Penang BN, especially Gerakan, MCA and MIC”, Regina Williams speculated in her piece on 7 March. A week before, Goh Ban Lee wrote on 27 Feb (“Wind of change or typhoon?”) that there was basis for excitement over a change in Penang. While saying that Penangites would still vote in BN because they can be ‘kiasu’, there were many issues that made them unhappy. “As of today, the mood is to teach the BN a lesson about fairness. But nothing is cast in stone as the BN election machinery is very powerful.”

Terence Fernandez wrote, in his analysis of Selangor, on 25 Feb that many of the non-Malay candidates from BN would face strong challenges, although he was optimistic about Lee Hwa Beng, Chew Mei Fun and G. Palanivel. Overall, he speculated that many of the seats including those held by Umno reps in Ijok and Cempaka would fall to the opposition.

In the Tamil language dailies, the focus in terms of predictions centred on the MIC candidates. Both Makkal Osai and Malaysia Nanban reported almost daily frustrations and opposition to the candidates named by S. Samy Vellu. The news reports showed communities and groups of people who were disappointed with the incumbents like P. Komala Devi and Kamala Ganapathy in Selangor, M. Saravanan and the MIC president himself.

The Tamil dailies provided focused analysis on the fate of the Indian candidates from all the parties and in quite long pieces. For example, on 26 Feb, Makkal Osai spent 14% of its total space for the day on analysing the candidates in its text and photographs. Malaysia Nanban spent 11.3% of its total space on 8/3 for a similar article. Both were considered balanced articles as they attempted to assess the potential of each candidate. Among those tipped to lose included the candidates P. Komala Devi, Kamala Ganapathy and S. Vigneswaran – the first two who received flak from the public and the papers' writers. M. Manoharan, who stood while behind held in detention under the Internal Security Act, was portrayed as a winner in the articles. However, both papers failed to predict the fate of MIC president S. Samy Vellu, instead they dedicated overwhelming space for him.

### 3. Quotes from editorials and opinion pieces

Commenting on the peace that prevailed during nomination day, Rehman Rashid wrote “there's room for cautious optimism that Malaysia's electoral system may yet serve to elevate the national discourse out of the barnyard and back to the proper policymaking forums where it belongs.” (NST, 26 February)

While acknowledging there was frustration among Penang Chinese over the Government, “there is none of the wind of change that had blown through the state in 1990.” (Joceline Tan, The Star, 26 February)

In questioning the commitment of the opposition, VK Chin wrote, “Opposition MPs and state assemblymen have never been known to be serving the people on a regular basis.” (The Star, 3 March)

“The country may be ungovernable, since the opposition will create as much chaos and mayhem as possible during this period should it come about.” (VK Chin, The Star, 4 March)

“They might succeed in having Lim Guan Eng as chief minister. But what happens next?” (Syed Nazri, NST, 4 March)

On the young people who do not vote, NST's Editorial had this to say: “this country's younger generation seems to have become a bunch of insufferably smug and self-satisfied narcissists who would much prefer queuing for movie tickets than ballot boxes.” (NST 4 March)

In “To be most effective, MIC candidates should be elected at the parliamentary and state levels. Why weaken representation in the government?” (Denison Jayasooria, NST, 8 March)

“Some would want change, perhaps just for the sake of it. Others want continuity and with it, stability. Meanwhile, the majority would argue, why change horses in mid-stream?” (Johan Jaafar, NST, 8 March)

“And why should a whole country bear the collective guilt for one black eye inflicted by one policeman who has already paid the price for his actions? I sympathise with what happened to Anwar but I will not carry the burden of guilt. Neither should the country.” (Kalimullah Hassan, NST, 5 March)

#### 4. Media Monitor's Diary – Comment and status

The media monitors submitted the qualitative analysis to the moderator of the blog who then uploaded the stories. Between the period from 24 February to 25 March, the total number of **unique visitors** was **35,218** – the highest was recorded during the polling weekend, and 1,405 hits a day.

In his concluding remarks from the monitoring, Charter 2000 coordinator Mustafa K. Anuar noted that generally the coverage by the mainstream media, as in the past elections, was predictably biased towards the incumbent BN.

“In their attempt to please and promote their political masters, their coverage tended to be overtly and overly propagandistic at times. For instance, the 'resurrection' of certain writers/journalists to do glowing write-ups of the BN was too obvious. In the case of the NST, you got certain personalities of the past, like Dr. Kamal Salih, Kalimullah Hassan, etc. writing in columns, singing praises of the BN. In a sense, these personalities were meant to give a direct or indirect endorsement of the incumbent coalition, apart from aiming to have these columns and writings lend the newspaper concerned a stamp of respectability to a certain degree.

However, Mustafa observed that: “the the propagandistic fervour of the mainstream media was met with 'rude interventions' from the alternative media, particularly the blogs and websites. At the height of the electoral campaigns, the mainstream media appeared unable to 'ignore' what was said in certain blogs and websites. Certain opposition ceramahs were indeed covered by the mainstream media although these news reports might not be adequate nor fair in coverage. Put another way, sometimes what appeared in the mainstream press seemed an indirect response to what was written in blogs and websites.

“Another instance involved the political advertisements of the component parties of the BN. Just a few days before polling, MIC in particular had taken out a one-page ad to highlight its past achievements and promises of more goodies in future. In fact, it threatened the readers, particularly the Indian constituency, that they'd have to pay a heavy price if they decided not to vote MIC into power. There was an immediate outcry in some of the popular blogs regarding this 'threat'. The next day the MIC ad saw a removal of that 'threat'.”

He added: “A general point that one could make here is that the road to mainstream media distortions, misinformation and brazen lies was, and remains to be, riddled with 'minefields' of the Internet. Even the PM has realised this eventually, although not in these terms.”

The blog received comments from readers who recognised the distortions by the media and rejected the BN propaganda. See the [blog](#) for comments.

## **C. CLOSING REMARKS**

### **Media in the post-12th General Elections**

Up to polling day, the message from the media was clear. Private and state broadcasters, together with the privately owned newspapers were in unison to endorse the BN, and to reject the opposition. They adhered to the line set by the BN through its many instruments - the law, political control and seeking favours.

Symbolic in this case is the front page on NST on 7 March - where the image and headline echoed and magnified the threat by the BN leader of voting the opposition and rejecting the Chinese and Indian parties in the coalition.

Some BN leaders went to the extent of complaining that the media did not provide enough space for the BN and even chided the media for their "inaccuracies" - in the case of the MIC, these represented high coverage of the opposition. According to the media monitor for the two Tamil dailies, local leader M. Rajen from the Durian Tunggal division had urged for temporary suspension of the Tamil dailies as they allegedly published lies and only the Malay, English and Chinese dailies reported the truth ("Individu dari parti politik mahu akhbar ditutup"). An anomaly of course given that the Tamil dailies showed high percentage of reports that were pro-BN. Until 8 March, the mainstream media was clear in its direction. Then came the political tsunami and a state of confusion descended.

The first indications came on the evening of polling day. TV stations covering the results of the elections saw the hosts, anchors and even invited guests scrambling to make sense of what they were hearing. The online versions of the mainstream newspapers trailed far behind the news portal of malaysiakini in reporting the updates on the results. In the post elections day, media bosses, in particular The Star group editor in chief, himself not known to promote press freedom and under whose leadership the newspaper has performed the worst among the English dailies, seem to indicate some changes in their editorial.

But there is a long way to go. How do editors now react to the opposition-led states? Is their idea of reforming their editorial approach merely limited to giving space to DAP, PAS and PKR or to actually get back to the basics of journalism to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" (Finley Peter Dunne) irrespective of who's in power.

Conclusion from Media Monitor's Diary 2004

## **20 March 2004**

### **The verdict is out: No surprises, mainstream media clearly unfair**

As the shortest ever election campaigning comes to an end (“*Malaysia Boleh*” indeed), we would like to offer a few concluding remarks based on the monitoring of the mainstream media—particularly the English papers (the *New Straits Times*, *The Star*, *theSun*) and the news in English on TV1, TV3, ntv7 and channel 8.

And there is only one thing to say: other than the very slight exception of ntv7 and *theSun*, the other media have been clearly quite unfair to the opposition.

### **A flicker of hope from theSun and ntv7**

ntv7 tried now and then to include the opposition in its news bulletin but the performance has been very spotty at best.

*theSun* has shown more promise. It has provided proportionally more balanced news and views than the other two papers. Also, now and then, it has offered more balanced and critical analysis of the MCA.

Note, “critical” here is not about a negative outlook of a party. Rather, it involves asking follow-up questions instead of just accepting at face value whatever the news maker has to say. It also means trying to be balanced and fair.

However, the better performance of ntv7 and *theSun* offers, at best, a tiny hope. Yes, just a tiny one because what they have accomplished is really nothing to shout about when compared to the other papers and TV stations.

### **All others were BN cheerleaders**

These other papers and TV stations are either BN propaganda outlets (as in TV1 - even though it is supposed to be state-owned) or BN cheerleaders. And so, these other media are not interested in playing fair.

Of course, this is only one aspect of the uneven playing field in this 11th general election. The other areas include gerrymandering, the role played by the Election Commission, etc.

### **What do they tell their children?**

Given the seriously unfair advantage that the BN has in the campaigning, including the

amount of positive attention the party and candidates have received from their own media, there is only one thing left to say.

We cannot help but wonder what they actually say to their kids playing in a playground with other kids. Do they tell them, "It is ok not to play fair"?

Blog visitor Kurang Asam has this prediction: "Come Monday onwards we are going to have a one month tribute on how BN won, blown out of proportion. Just watch and see..."

You have been warned.

Blog visitor Hb doesn't see anything immoral about the unequal media access: "Well, you can't expect someone to speak against his own boss, can you?"

"However, if you have the advantage, why not use it for your own interest? There is a very thin line betw stupidity and integrity. I wouldn't say what BN is doing is immoral; it's not stupid either."

What do others think?

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For inquiries, call CIJ at 03-40230772 or contact us through our online contact form at <http://www.cijmalaysia.org/>