Research Collection Lee Kong Chian School Of Business

Lee Kong Chian School of Business

12-2006

Managing news in a managed media: Mediating the message in Malaysiakini.com

Augustine PANG
Singapore Management University, augustine@smu.edu.sg

Citation

Managing News in a Managed Media: Mediating the Message in *Malaysiakini.com*

Augustine Pang

Missouri School of Journalism
University of Missouri-Columbia

Widely regarded as an anomaly in the neo-authoritarian system in Malaysia, *Malaysiakini.com* is proving that managing an independent media in a government-managed media landscape is more than a Sisyphean struggle. Employing participant observation and interviews, supplemented by artifacts and media accounts, this study seeks to understand the media management of *Malaysiakini.com* through news management, using Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) hierarchy of influence model, which posits a framework of internal and external forces that affect news management. The study found determined attempts to minimize ideological influences through media socialization by accentuating on the direct influences, such as the journalists' role in shaping content, establishing structured routines to contain possible governmental and legal backlash, and aligning organizational sustainability to editorial prerogatives. The greatest impediment to its ability to maintaining its editorial independence, however, stem from the limitations exerted by extramedia forces, such as lack of press accreditation, legal constraints, and inter-media rivalry, that collectively act as a surrogate ideology. More than just learning about *Malaysiakini.com*, this study provides a critical platform to explicate media management issues that alternative media face working in restrictive media environments, with the potential of developing a counter-model of how they can be managed.

Introduction

On Jan 20, 2003, police raided the newsroom of the online newspaper, *Malaysiakini.com* (translated: Malaysia Now), following a complaint by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), a dominant partner of the ruling Barisan National coalition government, that it had published a letter that likened its youth organization to the US race-hate group, the Ku Klux Klan ('Police raid offices of online newspaper,' 2003). Files were seized, computers were dismantled, and the editor-in-chief was held for questioning for three hours ('KL defends raid on online paper,' 2003). This latest skirmish with the government was but one of the many that has plagued *Malaysiakini.com* since it began in November 1999. It had, on different occasions, been accused of receiving illegal funds (Lee, 2002); for spreading 'lies' ('Media groups will face action for spreading lies,' 2001); for misrepresenting facts (Emmanuel & Mohamed, 2001); and for publishing provocative anonymous letters (Khan, 2001, 'UUM calls for probe into Malaysiakini letter,' 2001).

The trilingual (English, Malay and Mandarin) online newspaper, hailed as an 'influential' news medium in Asia (Plate, 2001, p. 24) and acclaimed internationally ('Internet newspaper strays from the truth,' 2001), is arguably the most controversial news medium that has emerged in Malaysia in recent history because of its critical reports of the government that has ruled the country since 1963. Widely acknowledged as an anomaly in the Malaysian media system ('New online paper tests KL press limits,' 2000) where all of the media – three major television stations, six English-language newspapers, 16 vernacular newspapers, and more than 30 weekly publications and periodicals (Europa World Year Book, 2001; Zaharom, 2000) – follow a 'development journalism' model (Taylor & Kent, 1999, p. 138), a system where the media openly practise pro-government policy to aid in nation building, this study provides an intriguing opportunity to understand how this medium is independently managed in a government-managed media landscape.

Since White's (1950) seminal work on media gatekeeping, many studies have been conducted to find out how news is managed. Some researchers focused on internal influences like axiomatic characteristics such as timeliness, proximity, and conflict (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2001; Berkowitz, 1990; Chang & Lee, 1992; Gans, 1979; Gieber, 1956); while others argued that external influences, like ideology (Parsons & Xu, 2001; Xu & Parsons, 1997) play more critical roles. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) conceptualized a model that encompassed both internal and external influences. This model comprised of five layers of concentric circles, described as a 'hierarchy of influence,' each growing in importance and pervasiveness as it expands. At the heart or the bulls' eye of the concentric circle is the journalist, followed by media routines, organizational requirements, extramedia factors like economic influence, and finally, the state ideology. Being at the outermost circle, ideology is argued to have the most pervading influence on content.
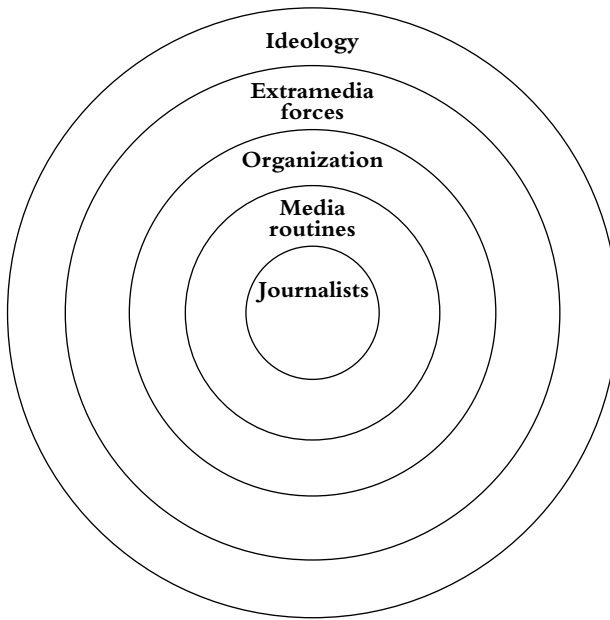
Figure 1: Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) hierarchy of influence model

The present study attempts to examine media management through the lens of news management, using Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) framework. This study is important for five reasons: First, by studying how a controversial medium operates in an environment that arguably does not support it further our understanding on the challenges of media management at the state-press level. Most studies into restrictive press systems have analyzed the state and nature of these systems from systemic perspectives (see Ellul, 1965; Merrill, 2000; Ostini & Fung, 2002; Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1953) and rarely delve into how media that challenge the status quo are managed. Bennett (2004) argued that studies into such 'deviant' (p. 22) cases, enriched with historical explanations leading to contemporary outcomes, help test and refine the viability of current perspectives.

Second, Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) model is positioned to understand how conventional media operate. It would, thus, be insightful to examine how these influences are managed in an 'alternative' media, to understand the competing but related influences between the external and internal forces, an area which Shoemaker (1991) argued to be the next frontier of gatekeeping studies.

Third, Zaharom (2000) argued that current research into the media in Malaysia have either been 'positivist and quantitative in nature' or 'policy-oriented' mainly aimed at examining the effectiveness of the implementation of policies (p. 147). Scholars have argued that one of the least understood areas in media discussions (in Malaysia) is the process of news-making and the value system behind the shaping of the media product. They have called for more research into the dynamics of the newsroom and the backgrounds and motivations of the reporters and editors, including the social conditioning in the workplace. Following their call for greater understanding into the media processes, it is hoped that this in-depth case study of the people, processes, and protocol (Stacks, 2002) of an influential alternative media would add

to further understanding of the uniqueness and complexity of media management in a government-managed media landscape.

Fourth, Zaharom (2000), arguing that research into media in Malaysia was still 'very much in its infancy' (p. 147) and calling for more concern for the 'development of theory' (p. 147) instead of importing Westernized theory that did not sufficiently explain its unique politico-socio realities, it is hoped that by testing a Westernized model in an Asian setting would provide the initial template in understanding how an Asian media works, albeit an alternative one. This case study has an 'instrumental' (Stake, 1995) role of explicating media management issues, a process Yin (2003) described as generalizing a particular set of results from a case study to a broader theory.

Lastly, this is arguably the first empirical study conducted to understand news management in *Malaysiakini.com*. Tong (2004) argued that to date, no studies have been done to examine 'Malaysiakini's role in promoting greater transparency and public accountability in Malaysia via new communication technology' (p. 298). Though scholarly work has focused on the impact of *Malaysiakini.com* in the larger politico-socio-economic-media landscape in Malaysia (see George, 2006; Tong, 2004; Zaharom & Wang, 2004), the editor-in-chief has said that no researcher had observed them at such 'close distance' (personal communication, July 29, 2003). It is hoped that the findings of this study would provide the initial template to understand how news is shaped that reflects the organization's positioning as an independent media.

Malaysiakini.com in a managed media landscape

Zaharom (2000) argued that the independent nature of the media, particularly the press in Malaysia, began to be transformed under the New Economic Policy (NEP) that was instituted in 1971. Under the plan, economic growth was emphasized, and through corporate takeovers, the media gradually came under the control of the ruling government, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). UMNO now has direct ownership of all the big local media conglomerates. Consequently, media ownership has largely remained in the hands of the few who are closely aligned with the government (McCargo, 2003; Taylor & Kent, 1999).

By all accounts, it is fair to argue that given its anti-establishment record, *Malaysiakini.com* would have little chance to survive, if historical precedents, particularly the events of 1987, were to be used as yardsticks. In a major political crackdown on October 27, 1987 called *Operasi Lalang* (Operation Lalang) by the then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed to overcome a crisis of leadership torn by factions within UMNO, politicians, academics, and activists were detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) (Zaharom and Wang, 2004). Three newspapers, including *The Star*, which was owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association, a coalition member of ruling government of which UMNO was the dominant partner, had their licenses suspended. Zaharom and Wang (2004) argued that in doing so, Dr Mahathir was indicating to its coalition partner that it was in charge and that the newspaper should rid itself of elements critical of the government. In its further tightening of its hold on the media, the following year, in 1988, the government amended the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) (1984) that now required

all mass circulation newspapers to have a printing permit before they could be published. This permit was to be applied and renewed every year.

Ten years after, parallels of *Operasi Lalang* were replayed. The arrest and conviction of the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim who was accused of sodomy and corruption, an act perceived as politically engineered, created splits within the Malay community 'not seen since *Operasi Lalang*' (Zaharom & Wang, 2004, p. 261). The *Reformasi* movement culminated in thousands of Anwar's supporters and concerned Malaysians took to the streets demanding justice for Datuk Anwar, and calling for an end to cronyism, collusion and corruption (Anuar, 2003).

It was in this context in the call for greater transparency and accountability from the government that *Malaysiakini.com*, Malaysia's first web-based newspaper (Zaharom & Wang, 2004) was, according to its CEO and co-founder, conceived in 1998. The mainstream media's coverage of the Anwar trial, regarded as unbalanced and unfair, dismayed Malaysians, who called for a boycott of the pro-establishment media. With the 1999 general elections looming, Malaysians were clamoring for viewpoints that the mainstream media declined to report. *Malaysiakini.com* was to fill that void. Tong (2004) argued that publishing content online would allow the daily to bypass applying for printing permit from the government as well as keep costs down. Besides, the Home Ministry 'would not have approved the setting up of a new daily with 'no political backing' and no assurances of support for the government' (Tong, 2004, p. 280).

By the time it began operations just before the 1999 general elections, *Malaysiakini.com* was riding on the crest of an anti-government sentiments, an emerging Internet boom, a growing demand for political transparency, democracy, accountability, and press freedom, and a rebounding economy (personal communication, July 29, 2003) and was providing an alternative perspective of local news.

Even though the government heeded, to some extent, to the call towards greater privatization and liberalization of the media, Zaharom (2000) argued this liberalization, which resulted in greater commercialization, has not, contrary to expectations, meant a concomitant 'loosening in government controls' (p. 145) or 'liberalization of media policies' (p. 139). The media were deemed far 'too important' to be allowed 'free rein' (p. 146). It is, thus, no coincidence that Malaysia has one of the worst records of press freedom (George, 2002). Reporters sans Frontieres (Reporters without Borders) had ranked Malaysia 110th out of 139 countries surveyed.

Merrill (2000) described the Malaysian media system as neo-authoritarian, one, based on Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's (1953) normative classification, that encompasses both authoritarian and social responsibility characteristics. Governance is dominated by one political party, which also controls the key institutions like the political, social, economic, and media systems. If the broadcast policies are of any indications of the kinds of roles the media are expected to play, then they include: (1) Explain 'in depth, with the widest coverage possible of government policies to ensure maximum understanding by the public;' (2) Stimulate 'public interest and opinion' to achieve changes in line with the requirements of the government; (3) Promote 'civic consciousness and foster development;' (4) Provide 'suitable elements

of popular education, information, and entertainment;' (5) Aid 'national integration efforts in a multi-ethnic society' (Zaharom, 2000, pp. 142-143).

Besides media ownership and political control, legal controls have been in place and increasingly tightened, as Zaharom (1996) argued, ironically, in times of media expansion. Singh (2001) argued that there are at least six laws governing the media, namely the Copyright Act; contempt of court; defamation; Official Secrets Act; printing licenses; and sedition. Through the printing license law, for instance, newspapers had lost their licenses when their editors or journalists 'publicly criticize the government' (Taylor & Kent, 1999, p. 138). Another formidable law that journalists are wary of, argued its editor-in-chief, is the Internal Security Act (personal communication, July 29, 2003), where the government has the powers to detain people without trial for a period of time.

Despite the tight controls, one medium that has remained censorship-free is the Internet, which is governed by another set of law called the Communication and Multimedia Act (1998). The government has resisted the urge to impose regulations online with offline press laws (McCargo, 2003) for two reasons. First, the Internet is still at its nascent stage, with an estimated one-tenth of the population having online access, hence, its political threats remain limited. Second, the government, anxious to develop its Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), equivalent to the US's Silicon Valley, does not want to frighten away potential investors by clamping down on a potentially lucrative industry ('New online paper tests KL press limits,' 2000). Tong (2004) noted that to attract foreign investments into the MSC, the government had declared a Bill of Guarantees, including non-censorship of the Internet. George (2002) argued that this 'laissez-faire Internet policy' has allowed *Malaysiakini.com* to blossom (p. 100). Even though the Malaysian government has reiterated it will maintain limited influence on cyberspace, *Malaysiakini.com* seems to bear the brunt of its wrath whenever issues of Internet policing and regulation are discussed.

Literature Review

News management processes: gatekeeping

Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley (2001) defined gatekeeping as the 'process by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped, and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media. It is often defined as a series of decision points at which news items are either continued or halted as they pass along news channels' (p. 233). Editors have been called 'gatekeepers' because they have the power to choose which stories pass through the 'gates' before they reach the audience. This critical role is heightened as editors, argued Hall (1992), encode what is 'meaningful discourse' (p. 130) so that the discourse is similarly meaningfully decoded by its consumers in what he described as 'determinate moments' (p. 129). Chibnall (1977) argued that reality can be socially defined in the exchange of information, and this can be examined by who owns and controls the news business as well as how journalists process news. Even though scholars have disagreed on which forces are more influential in influencing media content, what is agreed is that gatekeeping began even when the editor conceived and managed the stories till the time they see print.

External forces that shape media content:
Shoemaker and Reese's ideological and extramedia influences

Journalists may be subjected to larger, more pervasive, and ideological influences, argued Shoemaker and Reese (1996). Ideological forces are defined as the 'symbolic mechanism that serves as a cohesive and integrating force in society' (p. 221), like the state-press system. Ideology, among other functions, helps to 'predict when media and political elites intervene against normal journalistic routines and professionalism' (p. 224). Parsons (1997), for instance, found extensive ideological influence and interference by the state on *Xinhua*, China's national news agency.

Ideological influence, in turn, influences the extramedia forces. State-press ideology affect the channels and nature of news dissemination, such as relations between state agencies and the media, the freedom of newsmakers to supply journalists with information; to market concerns, which impact content indirectly, like how media organizations deal with competition, and how it relates to the community (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Chibnall (1977) argued that significant gatekeeping takes place between the journalists and their sources. 'If we wish to understand the selection and construction of news stories, we must examine the procedures which journalists adopt to identify potential stories and select appropriate sources, as well as the ideologies and stocks of knowledge which inform these decisions' (p. 7).

Internal forces that shape media content:
Shoemaker and Reese's organizational, media routines, and journalist influences

If external forces appear to exert indirect influence on news operations, internal forces exert more direct influences on media content, argued Shoemaker and Reese (1996). Internal forces begin with the influence of the organization. An organization has clear roles, structure, and a clear economic goal, i.e., to make profits. As such, economic constraints like advertising often influence editorial decisions. Arguably, organizations are described to be the 'actual gatekeeper', with the power to decide how routines are imposed, and what media content can be published. In their review of White's (1950) breakthrough study in gatekeeping, Reese and Ballinger (2001) argued that one of the drawbacks of White's research was that he attributed too much power to the editor. Instead, the authors argued that the analysis of Mr. Gates' 'micro-functional problem' of selecting news ought to be viewed from an institutional functional analysis perspective, that news selection 'remains a problem to be solved within the organization' (p. 647).

The organization's influence on the newspaper can be insidious, argued Breed (1955), which can take place through a common socialization process to breed conformity. Breed (1955) argued conformity could be bred through institutional sanctions; promotions of respect for superiors; and the promise of upward mobility and promotions for those who conform.

After organizational forces, the next layer of influence is media routines. Routines are 'patterned, routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs' (p. 105). Media organizations have their own sets of rules to help the system respond in predictable and structured ways. Of the internal 'forces',

perhaps the journalist has the most immediate influence on media content. Chibnall (1977) argued that journalists' framework of concepts and values is ordered by at least eight professional imperatives which guide their construction of news. These include immediacy, dramatization, personalization, simplification, titillation, conventionalism, structured access, and novelty. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argued that journalists decide on what content to publish based on factors such as their gender, ethnicity, educational background, political affiliation, religious beliefs, and even sexual orientation. Their similar backgrounds of gatekeepers have also found to play crucial roles in perpetuating similar mindsets (Buckalew, 1969; Peterson, 1979; Roberts & Bantimaroudis, 1997).

Confluence of internal and external forces that shape media content: Dynamic interaction of levels of influences

The shaping of media content may also be influenced simultaneously by both external and internal forces. Gans (1979) found that journalists select news based on four key external factors, which have been internally routinized in newsrooms, for instance, stories that involve the government and governmental actors; and stories that have high impact on the nation and national interest. Such routinization, argued Shoemaker and Reese (1996), are formally instituted by way of a command-and-control hierarchy, where rank and roles are delineated, and this ensured that decisions made by management, are respected and followed. Indeed, those holding the reins in the organization, such as news directors, often use their management prerogatives as justifications for how they select and portray news, argued Tuggle and Huffman (1999). It is argued that these management prerogatives can be in response to external forces. For instance, the importance of extramedia actors to media organization may lead the journalists and the organization to institute certain routines in the newsroom whenever there is a story involving the extramedia actor.

Given the competing influences on media content, this study examines,

RQ 1: How do external forces shape media content in *Malaysiakini.com*?

RQ 2: How do internal forces shape media content in *Malaysiakini.com*?

RQ 3: Which forces, external or internal forces, are more evident in shaping content? How are competing influences reconciled?

RQ 4: How are these influences ordered, in terms of pervasiveness of influence? Why are they ordered this way?

RQ 5: Operating in a managed media environment, how does *Malaysiakini. com* ensure the independence of its media content?

Method

Given the dearth of research in this area in the study of media in Malaysia, qualitative research methods are argued to be the appropriate tools to explore this relatively new area of research (Lindlof, 1995) as the descriptiveness of the study would enhance conceptual understanding. The qualitative method allows the

researcher to delve into, and explain, the uniqueness and complexity of the news management processes, and to understand the embeddedness and interactions these processes have with their larger contexts (Stake, 1995). In this study, I used the case study approach. This approach is essentially 'the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances' (Stake, 1995, p. xi).

Two main methods, depth interviews and participant observations, were used. These were supplemented by examinations of news accounts and internal documents. Yin (2003) argued that together, these lent richness of data and ensure methodological triangulation.

Interviews

Regarded by Bingham and Moore (1959) as 'conversation with a purpose,' Lindlof (1995) argued that interviews allowed the researcher to accomplish several goals. These include, (1) understand the social actor's perspective; (2) infer the processes of interpersonal relationships; and (3) understand 'distinctive languages' (p. 166) like jargons, vocabularies and other forms of speech used by actors in their natural settings. Anderson (1987) suggested that interviews were best employed to 'build a stock of explanation' to answer basic questions. The researcher's role was to understand discourse which is a repository of social meanings' (p. 330).

The approach taken here is adapted from McCracken's four-stage process of long-interview inquiry. The long interview provides the researcher 'the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves' (McCracken, 1988, p. 9). The four-stage process includes first, review of analytic categories (i.e., literature review); second, review of cultural categories; third, interview procedure; and four, interview analysis.

The review of analytic categories, although providing a framework for this study, was designed not to bias data. Rather, because the researcher is well versed with the literature, it aids in defining domains to be explored when developing an interview protocol. Additionally, since the interviews were conducted in Malaysia, this researcher's cognizance of cultural nuances and innuendos were useful to explain possible bias that may have unintentionally resulted in the interpretation of data.

Prior to conducting the interviews, this researcher carried out a thorough background reading of the media coverage on *Malaysiakini.com* to identify the key players (Lindlof, 1995). The editor-in-chief was contacted in March 2003 for access to carry out the study. The interview guide (Lindlof, 1995) approach was adopted. All the key players in *Malaysiakini.com*, including the editor-in-chief and co-founder; the CEO and the other co-founder; and the chief news editor; two other news editors; two sub-editor; two journalists; and the chief technology officer, were interviewed (For list of questions posed to the editor-in-chief, see appendix).

Interviews were conducted on *Malaysiakini.com* premises, and each interview lasted between one and four hours. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed. This yielded more than 80 pages of double-spaced data. The transcripts were read and reread, and they were interpreted according to this researcher's judgment based

on existing theory and literature. Haruta and Hallahan (2003) argued that the investigator's judgment is a primary instrument of inquiry in qualitative research.

Participant observation

Such observations provide a thick and rich description of a group (Fetterman, 1989). In July 2003, this researcher spent five days at the *Malaysiakini.com* office in Kuala Lumpur, capital of Malaysia. The editor-in-chief had said that because of the persecutions the journalists had endured, they had developed a 'siege mentality' (personal communication, July 29, 2003), so even though he had given this researcher verbal agreement to study the organization, this researcher had to convince the staff to accede to access. Approval was finally granted after much deliberation, with restrictions placed on times for interviews, and observation access. Maintaining confidentiality of informants is another condition of access. Given the restrictions imposed, this researcher's role adopted the role of a 'complete observer' (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 248). Fieldwork comprised observing the news management processes from the time the journalists began work at 9 am, to the time they ended, at about 8.30 pm, logging about 45 research hours.

A subsequent one-day visit to the *Malaysiakini.com* office was made in made in June 2004 to update notes. In all, participant observation yielded 41 pages of double-spaced field notes.

Internal documents

A document detailing the genesis, mission, plan and vision of *Malaysiakini.com* was obtained. This document also includes readers' comments, other media's reportage of *Malaysiakini.com* and enumerates the challenges it faces. Another document is a survey of readers on their reading habits of the website and their perceptions of it being independent.

Media accounts

To get a sense of how media content between *Malaysiakini.com* differ from the other media, stories in a week's worth of news reports in the English-language mainstream media, namely *The New Straits Times*, *The Sun*, and *The Star*, were compared. Only stories that were published by both *Malaysiakini.com* and the mainstream were analyzed.

Analysis of data

All the transcripts, field notes, media reports, and documents were analyzed to develop a sense of the data as a whole. The analysis was carried out in three stages. First, interview data was compared and cross-referenced with field notes. These were examined through theoretical lens and categorized into themes (Stake, 1998) that were informed and guided by the literature. Second, the documents were analyzed to provide additional insights to what had been observed and noted. Third, media accounts were analyzed to understand how different *Malaysiakini.com*'s reports were

from the other media to get a sense of how it tried to differentiate and distinguish itself. Stake (1995) argued that data from these sources enables methodological triangulation to take place.

Verification of data

Eckman and Lindlof (2003) argued that the use of multiple methods like combining field observations with interviews 'increases the likelihood that plausible, insightful interpretations can be achieved' (p. 69). Further steps were also taken to ensure the objectivity and veracity of data. First, ensuring the authenticity of data. The interview guide was used to ensure that critical issues were rigorously addressed while allowing for spontaneous interjections. By maintaining interview distance, the interviewer was cognizant of his preconceptions and ensured that these did not contaminate the data. Second, ensuring the plausibility of data. The interview data was constantly compared with documents. In doing so, special attention was paid to patterns of consistency and contradictions from the multiple sources of evidence. Such systematic analysis of data, as Plowman et al (1995) argued, served as 'a record of the process of reflection and analysis' (p. 245). Third, ensuring criticality of data. Assumptions, conjectures, and possibilities were related to existing crisis literature so that new knowledge were matched against existing knowledge, yielding further understanding in the field. Golden-Biddle & Locke (1993) argued that implementing these safeguards of authenticity, plausibility, and criticality were time-tested measures to ensure the quality of qualitative data. In their study using the same method, Plowman et al (1995) attested to the veracity of these safeguards as they were able to 'capitalize on the advantages of the long interview and case study approaches while control for inherent disadvantages' (p. 243).

Finally, attempts to verify the veracity of the findings were facilitated through member-checking processes. Member checks are opportunities for researchers to solicit informants' views for 'accuracy and palatability' (Stake, 1995, p. 115). Member checks were conducted with the two co-founders and a sub-editor between June and August 2004. The veracity of the study was unquestioned, with both the founders describing the findings as 'refreshing' and 'thought-provoking'. Minor corrections were requested, and acceded to.

Results and Discussion

The first research question examines the influence of the external forces in shaping media content.

Influence of ideological forces:

Even though the prevailing state-press ideology is one where the media support the government's agenda, it appeared to be the exact opposite in *Malaysiakini.com*. The individual ideology, according to the CEO, was shaped by the two co-founders. The development and expression of individual ideology, however, did not take place automatically among newer journalists even though they were encouraged, and had enormous freedom, to do so. The struggle centered on changing the mindsets of new journalists on how they now need not submit to the government's media

agenda in their reporting. Many who became journalists in the Malaysian media have long been socialized by the predominant state-press ideology of unquestioned reverence to the authorities. The chief news editor said, 'Yes, we have this problem of fixed mindsets. That's why we spend more time briefing and debriefing. And we found talking to reporters individually more effective than engaging them in a group setting, where the fixed mindsets are displayed more' (personal communication, July 30, 2003). Indeed, observations affirmed that the newer journalists did not always appear to share the same level of conviction about issues of press freedom. To some, it appeared that this was just another job. The editor-in-chief admitted that the 'burnt-out rate' was high (personal communication, July 31, 2003).

What kept the individual ideology going when the predominant ideology was overwhelmingly dominating? Both the two co-founders attributed it to a sense of mission.

> The editor-in-chief said,
>
> 'There were times when I felt we should give up ... But 99% of the time, we keep going. We're doing the best we can within the environment we're in ... Over the past few years, we've achieved a lot. We've put pressure on the mainstream media to be a little bit bolder; we've put pressure on the government to talk about press freedom' (personal communication, July 29, 2003).

The continuing sense of mission in keeping the flames of their ideology of press freedom burning has resulted in widespread accolades. In 2000, the website was awarded the Press Freedom award by Reporters without Borders (Tong, 2004). In the same year, its editor-in-chief was awarded the International Press Freedom award by the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (Tong, 2004; Zaharom & Wang, 2004). The International Press Institute also awarded it the Media Pioneer award in 2001 (Tong, 2004). The United States daily, *San Francisco Chronicle*, described the website as 'entrepreneur of truth' and 'model of press freedom' ('Entrepreneur of the truth,' 2000).

Influence of extramedia forces

Embarking on a mission to push media freedom in a restrictive environment invariably led to two diametric outcomes: Sympathy and support from anti-government groups; and alienation from the government. In that regard, *Malaysiakini.com* has often been labeled as a 'pro-opposition' media. The opposition politicians and marginalized social groups such as human rights groups saw *Malaysiakini.com* as an ally, and made themselves accessible to its journalists, while the authorities perceived it as a thorn in its flesh.

The chief news editor described this situation as 'unfair.' He said,

> 'It is not that we don't want to cover the government ... they don't welcome us. We've also done stories against the opposition when they did something wrong ... and they had been unhappy with us. At the end of the day, we're running a media here. They don't dictate to us what we can do' (personal communication, July 30, 2003).

Tong (2004) supported the editor's claims that efforts were made to 'to debunk the misconception that *Malaysiakini* [italics original] was siding with the opposition' (p. 284). For instance, for two months, the website managed to involve UMNO Youth chief Hishamuddin Hussein, who was the Youth and Sports Minister, in an online question-and-answer session. That column ceased 'due to what was believed to be pressure from within the Cabinet' (p. 285).

Indeed, access to government sources were issues brought up by editors when they met for an evening news meeting on July 29, 2003. Field notes showed that the editor-in-chief wanted a story to incorporate both government and non-government views, and asked an editor to make contact with his government sources. This editor was probably the only journalist who had more access to the government officials than the others. He said the only reason they agreed to speak to him was because he had been friends with many of these officials even before he joined *Malaysiakini. com*. The lack of access extended to restrictions at government-sanctioned press conferences.

When asked how *Malaysiakini.com* journalists dealt with the lack of press accreditation, the editor-in-chief said,

> 'During press conferences, we have Cabinet ministers who say before they start, 'Are there any *Malaysiakini.com* journalists around?' Sometimes they recognize us, and they'll say, 'Escort them out.' One time, our journalist got into a police function, and the public relations officer came and told the journalist, 'Do not write a single thing from this press conference.' Our journalist wrote the news and a comment piece as well. No action was taken against us' (personal communication, July 29, 2003).

Tong (2004) noted that whenever this happened, *Malaysiakini.com* would 'write a story to inform its readers what happened' (p. 290). In instances where *Malaysiakini. com* journalists were granted access, it did not mean they had received endorsement from the authorities. George (2006) argued that it only meant the website's existence was 'tolerated' (p. 170).

Over the years, *Malaysiakini.com* journalists had identified who would be accessible to them, who would not. The editor-in-chief said,

> 'The NGOs, companies, opposition parties, some top people who are personal contacts of our senior journalists would talk to us. The police, key members of the government, top government officials, and the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) people would not talk to us ... Some of them are coming around' (personal communication, July 29, 2003).

This was further borne out in a comparative analysis of a story published by *Malaysiakini.com* and the mainstream media on July 30, 2003. The story was about Muslim men divorcing their wives through short messaging system (SMS). Both *The Sun* ('Dr M: Don't use SMS to declare divorce,' 2003) and *The Star* ('Dr M expresses unease over use of SMS in Muslim divorce case,' 2003) led off their stories citing government sources, including then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed, and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Dr Rais Yatim, on the illegality and immorality of such an act ('Rais: E-messages not legally binding,' 2003). Even though it had interviewed Minister in Prime Minister's Department

Dr Rais Yatim before on judiciary issues (Tong, 2004), access was not available for this story. *Malaysiakini.com*'s story, instead, solicited views from opposition members from Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) as well as NGOs like the Women's Aid Organization ('Call to maintain dignity of Muslim divorce procedure,' 2003; 'Mahathir steps into SMS divorce row,' 2003).

In another story, published on July 24, 2003, about judicial promotions, mainstream media like the *New Straits Times* reported their stories based on the Chief Justice's remarks on the criteria for promotion, including seniority ('CJ: Seniority not sole criterion,' 2003). *Malaysiakini.com* followed up this story from a statement by a prominent opposition member, Democratic Action Party (DAP) deputy chairperson Karpal Singh, who argued that seniority should be an important criterion for promotion, after merit and competency ('Judicial promotions: 'No justice for judge',' 2003). None of the mainstream newspapers such as the *New Straits Times* and *The Star* carried Mr Karpal Singh's remarks.

Over time, they had also attracted an unlikely group of informants: The whistle blowers. The chief news editor said, 'Increasingly, more are contacting us. In the past three months, three of our big stories came from them' (personal communication, July 30, 2003). In July 2003, for instance, the website, following a tip-off from a whistle blower, published a series of investigative reports exposing UMNO Pahang awarding a 'plum' logging concession believed to be worth RM 100 million to the ruling party in 1998 (see 'UMNO Pahang given multi-million logging concessions,' 2003). This was subsequently refuted by UMNO Pahang in the *New Straits Times* (see 'Logging: Pahang UMNO not involved,' 2003).

In summary, as far as the role of external forces are concerned, it appears that even though the state's press ideology dominated the media landscape, it has a diminished influence on how media content was shaped in *Malaysiakini.com* where individual ideology appeared to remain steadfast. This appeared to be contrary to Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) assertion that the 'underlying ideology' (p. 83) was more powerful in influencing media content than the journalist's ideology.

The second research question examines the influence of the internal forces in shaping media content.

Influence of the organization

Over the years, *Malaysiakini.com* had undergone several changes in its business model to sustain operations. Starting with seed money of RM$500,000 (US$125,000), its business strategy has evolved from selling advertisement space on its website and syndicating content, to business and technology development, and to its current subscription-based model, its CEO said (personal communication, July 29, 2003).

Over the years, *Malaysiakini.com* has incurred losses since it began operations. Internal documents showed that it incurred a net loss of RM 31,786 for the financial year ending 2000; and RM 95,879 in financial year ending 2001. In 2002, it reportedly incurred a loss of RM 946,829 (Tong, 2004). Internal documents showed losses were estimated to be around RM 769,000 in 2003. George (2006) noted that in early 2003, it had around 2,000 subscribers when it would need 10,000 to be self-

financing. 'The news media industry had yet to find a way to persuade readers to pay for political or general news on the web. Malaysiakini was no exception,' argued George (2006, p. 168).

Though it had received offers of investment, in exchange for influence on content, the CEO insisted that *Malaysiakini.com* 'would not submit to pressure to tame its content' (personal communication, July 29, 2003). Tong (2004) noted that even as a business model continued to evolve, it remain focused on its editorial goals. The editorial goals appeared to take precedence over economic goals, and economic goals existed to support editorial goals.

Indeed, fieldwork showed that there was not one instance when business management interfered with news management. The office at *Malaysiakini.com* was divided into two divisions: One handling business and technology, and another handling editorial. Even though both divisions occupied the same level, they each have separate rooms, and concentrated on their respective tasks. The lobby, which separates the two divisions, appeared to be the unspoken dividing line, metaphorically and physically. It was as if editorial integrity and independence took precedence over everything that *Malaysiakini.com* did, and the *raison d'etre* for the business to exist. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argued that in some organizations, business prerogatives dictate content. The reverse appeared to be true here.

Influence of Media Routines

Even though *Malaysiakini.com* operates a 24-hour operation, the newsroom appeared to be grounded on fixed routines, which lend a certain order and closure in an otherwise timeless day. The newsroom routine began at 9 am. Most began to browse through the daily mainstream newspapers or call newsmakers for story ideas. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) characterized the habit of reading mainstream newspapers as 'confirming' (p. 124) one's own news judgment. By 10.30 am, all would head for the morning news meeting, which usually lasts an hour. After the meeting, the reporters plunged straight into news collecting. The editors and sub-editors began working on stories carried over from the previous day or processing press releases. Every story that was worked on would be indicated on a white board hanging on one corner of the newsroom, including the status of editing or sub-editing. This went on until about 5 pm, when the pace visibly picked up and stories were feverishly uploaded. By 8.30 pm, after the evening news meeting, *Malaysiakini.com* ceased operations for the day.

Another structured media routine was the rigor of fact checking. A sub-editor said this provided the necessary alert system to ensure that laws were not broken. The Communication and Multimedia Act (1998) might have ensured it freedom of expression on the Internet, but it did not exempt the online newspaper from other laws of the land, like defamation. To a question if journalists at *Malaysiakini.com* practice self-censorship, a senior journalist said,

> 'When I was working in the mainstream media, each time I wrote a story, I would ask myself what my editors would say, what the government would say, what the police might say ... Here, the only question I ask is, 'Will I be breaching the law?'' (personal communication, July 31, 2003).

Another routine observed was the routine of always looking out for political undertones in all stories *Malaysiakini.com* covered. Stories that did not have political themes were implicitly deemed a waste of the use of resources. The chief news editor attributed this to *Malaysiakini.com*'s niche: Political stories which the other media downplay or ignore. This dogged focus on political implications was evident with observations made during the morning news meeting on July 30, 2003. A reporter suggested several possible non-political story angles to follow up on a murder that had hogged the headlines at that time. The editor-in-chief rejected those ideas because of 'duplication.' In giving his reasons, the editor-in-chief said at the meeting that the other mainstream media had 'gone to town with it' and that *Malaysiakini.com* should find ways to provide 'value-added' to its reports.

This was further borne out in a comparative analysis of a story published by *Malaysiakini.com* and the mainstream media on July 28, 2003. The *New Straits Times* reported Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed's meeting with more than 3,000 participants at the Seventh World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention at Sunway Pyramid Convention Center in Petaling Jaya, including an excerpt of the question-and-answer session that touched on various aspects of Chinese involvement in business and culture, the role of Chinese entrepreneurs in globalization, opportunities for Chinese to share their wealth with other ethnic groups, and how Malaysian Chinese can establish a 'bamboo network' to help overseas Chinese invest in Malaysia ('Prime Minister delights Chinese businessmen with witty, frank answers,' 2003). *Malaysiakini.com* also reported on that event but focused on one, the political aspect, of Dr Mahathir's talk: If he would step down from office in October 2003, as he had promised ('Mahathir: My credibility's at stake if I don't go,' 2003).

The editor-in-chief was unapologetic about this approach. He explained,

> 'People come to *Malaysiakini.com* because they cannot get this kind of stories anywhere else, not because we are able to cover the full length and breadth of Malaysia. We can't do that because we don't have enough manpower. We would focus on issues we think are ignored by the mainstream media' (personal communication, July 29, 2003).

Another journalist, a sub-editor, concurred,

> 'There's value-added, more input. Nothing seems to be too small because we always look at the issue from the big picture, like what this story has to do with the constitution, freedom, what is it in terms of the larger political picture, what are the implications in a multiracial society, etc.' (personal communication, July 30, 2003).

Influence of the journalist

If the backgrounds of the journalists reflect the kinds of media content they produce, as Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argued, then the backgrounds of some of the *Malaysiakini.com* journalists can possibly explain, to some degree, the roots of the formation of an alternative media and how they interpret their roles as journalists. Among the nine staff interviewed, two were student activists; one, a social and media activist; and one a former opposition politician. The two co-founders, student activists in Australia, attributed their fight for press freedom as an extension of their

student activism days. Energized by the change they saw as a result of their exposure, the co-founders returned to Malaysia, hoping to be agents of change. They worked in mainstream media and quickly became disillusioned.

> The chief executive officer said,
>
> 'There were limitations and the lines were drawn. You can't criticize the government, or point fingers at government departments or political party. You can, of course, talk about the problems, for example, labor problems, environment problems, or poverty, in general terms. The minute you start saying these fellows are not doing their jobs, or there is corruption, and analyze why this is happening ... it becomes difficult. In other newspapers, you start writing between the lines you can't get people to take action ... which was severely lacking in the Malaysian press' (personal communication, July 29, 2003).

With their own savings and seed money, the two co-founders formed *Malaysiakini.com* and established their own editorial direction and principles. The editor-in-chief said, 'Basically, we want to promote transparency in government, avoid corruption, and fight for independence of judiciary' (personal communication, July 29, 2003). The story agendas were based largely on these principles. A senior journalist said, 'We try to be responsible in whatever we write ... we would like to feel the story is worthy and that people would appreciate that someone is making the effort to provide an alternative view or something that can open the mind' (personal communication, July 31, 2003). George (2006) noted that *Malaysiakini.com* journalists negotiate 'a middle ground that is neither politically engaged to the point of being obviously biased, nor detached to the point of being apathetic. Getting the balance right has entailed long discussions' (p. 162).

> This was concurred by interviews. Asked how content was shaped in *Malaysiakini.com*, a sub-editor said,
>
> 'There is no pre-agenda. Even though certain items may be there, the bulk of it gets decided during the morning conference. People have an idea how to do something or pursue a certain story and you may come with an angle, but with everybody's input, the angle may get married or refined. It is better because you actually have the strength of everyone's discussion. Even confusion can be a very starting point' (July 30, 2003).

Even though *Malaysiakini.com* journalists had free reign over what they could report, their abilities to push their agendas further individually and collectively were hampered by extramedia forces which manifested themselves in three ways: The lack of press accreditation; inter-press ambivalence and rivalry; and legal restrictions.

Press accreditation issued by the government was only given to journalists working in traditional media like print or broadcast. Tong (2004) noted that these press cards issued by the Information Ministry enabled journalists to cover ministerial and official functions. Tong (2004) argued that *Malaysiakini.com* first applied for accreditation in 2000. After six months of deliberation, the Information Minister rejected the application, in April 2001, arguing that *Malaysiakini.com* needed to obtain a publishing permit from the Home Affairs Ministry before the Information Ministry could issue the press cards. *Malaysiakini.com* had pursued clarification on

the need to have printing permit before one could be issued press cards, however, there has been 'no concrete reply to date' (Tong, 2004, p. 290). The editor-in-chief said, 'Because we don't have press card, we're not considered official journalists, and that restrict our movements and access to government officials. But we're not letting that affect what we want to do' (personal communication, July 29, 2003).

The fierce editorial independence *Malaysiakini.com* displayed appeared to have alienated it from the other journalists from the mainstream media. This had led to inter-press ambivalence and rivalry. On one hand, the mainstream journalists egged *Malaysiakini.com* journalists to ask questions that they were afraid to ask during press conferences. On the other hand, the repeated ability of *Malaysiakini.com* journalists to stretch the boundaries of press freedom revealed the inadequacies these journalists might have felt about themselves as guardians of freedom. The editor-in-chief said,

> 'There's a lot of jealousy. We can do a lot more than they can ... the fact that we exist have put them in situations where they have to defend themselves. In Malaysia, 90% of the journalists are quite happy. They have a regular paycheck, they sleep easy at nights, they're happy being mouthpieces of the government, and they'll defend the government. Whenever there are issues of controversy, they'll try to package it in such a way to damage control' (personal communication, July 29, 2003).

Tong (2004) argued in its pursuit of media freedom, *Malaysiakini.com* 'has steered away from running down any of the existing media organizations. Rather, it has focused on tackling the issues of tight media laws and ownership by the ruling coalition' (p. 300). Still, Tong (2004) argued that the differences in reportage between the website and the mainstream media would not escape the eyes of discerning readers who would turn to *Malaysiakini.com* to supplement their reading should they suspect bias in the mainstream media. Tong (2004) argued, 'Every time mainstream newspapers choose not to publish some news for political reasons, if discussed on *Malaysiakini*, they risk suffering another blow to their credibility in the eyes of the public' (p. 299).

Of the three extramedia limitations, perhaps the one that exerted the most influence on *Malaysiakini.com* was legal restrictions. The four laws uppermost on the minds of the journalists were: (1) Official Secrets Act (1972), which means that any document classified as an official secret, should not be communicated; (2) Sedition Act (1948), which criminalizes any speech that might bring hatred, contempt against the government, and ill-will and hostility among the ethnic groups; (3) Internal Security Act (1960), which empowers the government to detain without trial any suspect who act against the interests of the state; and (4) Defamation Act, where the burden of proof rests on the plaintiff, not the defendant.

Indeed, during a morning news meeting, one of the news items discussed was the availability of a satellite picture of a logging site that was the subject of a corruption probe involving a high-ranking official. An editor asked the team if this picture should be used, to which a sub-editor instinctively responded: 'Is it illegal to use it? What about under the Officials Secrets Act?' Even though the team had initially abandoned the idea of using the picture so as to err on the side of caution, it published it eventually.

Asked about the guiding principle in dealing with stories that had legal ramifications, the editor-in-chief said,

> 'If we hit a brick wall, we'll leave it. We can't follow up on a lot of stories because we don't have information that we can back up. I always tell my journalists to always get it right. I don't mind if we miss 9 out of 10 stories, but if we get it wrong, we get it (from the authorities). Over the last 4 years, we've been careful that there's no single lawsuit. There have been police reports made but they were not substantiated enough to get us hit' (personal communication, July 30, 2003).

In summary, as far as the roles of internal forces were concerned, it appeared that the journalists exerted great influence on media content. This appeared to be contrary to Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) assertion that the journalists' influence on media content could be 'minor' (p. 78) and 'not direct' (p. 88).

The third and fourth research questions examine the relative influences of external and internal forces, how competing influences are reconciled, and how they are ordered. These questions are addressed concurrently.

Relative Influences of External and Internal Forces

Among the internal forces, the business aspects of running the online newspaper, ranked the lowest. The influence of the journalist, on the contrary, appeared to be dominant. Media routines appeared to be a function, or manifestation, of the overriding influence of the journalists, for the purposes of self-preservation and continued existence. The persistent and consistent routine of checking for possible violation of the law was not that the journalists feared incurring the wrath of ideological and extramedia forces. It was carelessly risking annihilation when they could have been more vigilant and continued their Sisyphean struggle.

Between the external forces, the state ideology played extremely minimal role in shaping media content while extramedia forces were dominant influences. It is argued that *Malaysiakini.com* attempted to reconcile competing influences of external and internal forces by examining which had immediate and direct influence on media content, rather than which had indirect influence. The immediate and direct influences on media content were the journalists, the media routines, and extramedia forces. Even though the organizational forces determined the newspaper's business survival, and ideological forces determined the newspaper's political survival, it appeared that these assumed distant, secondary roles.

Based on the analysis of *Malaysiakini.com*, I have reordered the hierarchy of influence in this order of importance.
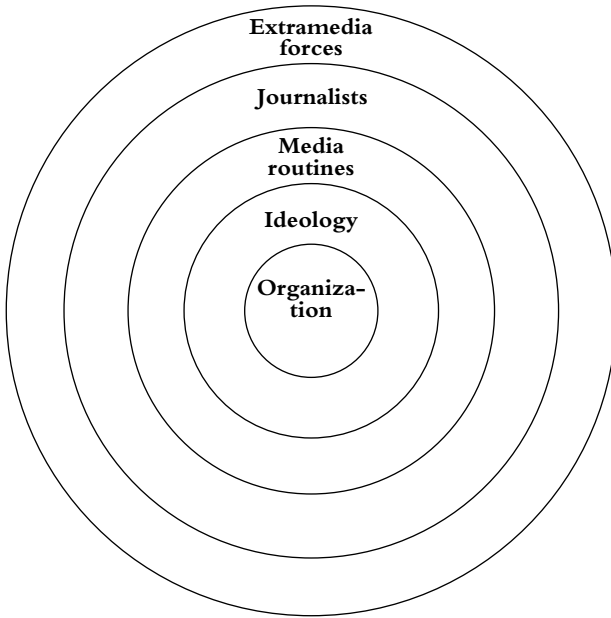
Figure 2: Reordering of the hierarchy of influence in Malaysiakini.com

The fifth research question examines what strategies *Malaysiakini.com* use to preserve the independence of its media content.

Even though *Malaysiakini.com* was independent in shaping its media content, it was only as independent as the external environment, particularly extramedia forces, allowed it. Perhaps, the conundrum it faced was best summed up by a sub-editor,

> 'Are we independent? Yes, we are in terms of ownership, editorial judgment and control. Are we totally independent in terms of our allegiance to our sources? I don't think so, because we need them ... Are we totally independent? We try to be, as far as possible ... ' (personal communication, July 30, 2003).

In a survey of its readers conducted in March 2003, almost 90 per cent of its readers regarded the website as independent. The chief executive officer argued that it was a goal the website tried to achieve. 'We're an example that the media can be run by professionals and independently. And for the mainstream media, that there is such thing as independent journalists' (personal communication, July 30, 2003). George (2006) paraphrased the explication of the term, independence, in the context of *Malaysiakini.com*. Independent journalism did not mean indifference, or partisan, or apolitical. It meant a 'political but non-partisan brand of independent journalism' (p. 163) centered on the cornerstones of 'credibility, independence, fairness and accuracy (p. 162).

However, it is argued that as much as *Malaysiakini.com* journalists would like to regard themselves as agenda-setters, their agendas and independence were very much limited by the agendas set by the extramedia forces. In a scenario where the predominant ideology was absent, extramedia forces acted as surrogate ideology that dictated what this medium could or could not report. That, by far, had proved to be

the major stumbling block in its quest to achieve its potential as a truly independent medium.

Conclusion

This present study has investigated the media management processes at Malaysia's alternative, independent news medium, through news management. One limitation of the study is restricted access to journalists and possible observations of how they work in the field. Given the 'siege mentality' of *Malaysiakini.com* journalists, it is a restriction this researcher willingly accepts in exchange for the privileged access.

Since this is arguably the first empirical study conducted on *Malaysiakini.com*, it has provided a fruitful exploratory area of research. As with all case studies, this uniqueness of this case cannot be generalized. However, future studies can be conducted on other 'deviant' media to generate more rigorous analytic generalizations (Yin, 2004), particularly in countries that follow a 'development journalism' system, like *Tempo* magazine in Indonesia.

If Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) model is indicative of how conventional, mainstream media are managed, these studies would, collectively, shed light on a counter-model of how alternative media can be managed.

Postscript

Since this study was conducted, Malaysia has now come under a new administration under Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was Dr Mahathir Mohamed's deputy. *Malaysiakini.com*'s clashes with the authorities over its media content continued. In April 2005, *Malaysiakini.com* published a report saying Prime Minister Abdullah had given permission to prosecute three Cabinet ministers and a state minister for corruption. The article, meant as an April Fool's joke, saw another story posted three minutes later clarifying the prank. The government, however, was not amused. The Cabinet directed the Energy, Water and Communications Ministry to invoke the Multimedia and Communications Act 1998 against the website. Till date, there have been no reports what actions were taken. In August 2006, Kelantan police lodged a report against *Malaysiakini.com* for allegedly defaming them in an article that claimed that the perpetrator of the pepper spray attack on former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was believed to be a member of the police special operations force. The outcome of this police report is unknown.

Zaharom and Wang (2004) argued even though the new Prime Minister had promised Malaysians that he wanted to encourage more compassion and open-mindedness about democracy, it would be difficult to see how one individual can 'dismantle structures which have come about due to the logic and the demands of a wider capitalist system and a development policy that embraces such a system' (p. 265). There would have to be a more open flow of information and tolerance of independent views between the authorities, its citizens, and the media, the authors argued. However, the authors were not too sanguine about media reforms, at least in the short term. Their argument: Current structures and hierarchies serve to perpetuate the powers of people who populate them. For media reform to take place, it would

entail 'democratizing every major sphere of activity, including the economy and the media' (p. 266).

That would take time.

Appendix

List of questions posed to the editor-in-chief of *Malaysiakini.com*

1. Why start *Malaysiakini.com*?
2. What is the editorial model?
3. How do you reconcile the need to balance both?
4. What is your production schedule like?
5. How different is the news from the mainstream media?
6. How do you source for news?
7. Who are you likely to talk to and why? Example?
8. How do Malaysiakini journalists deal with the lack of access to certain sources?
9. What or who do you think of when you shape your content?
10. What types of news does *Malaysiakini.com* focus on?
11. What do you tell your journalists to look out for?
12. How do you balance opposition stories with more government stories?
13. How do your journalists deal with the ideological values in the system that they have grown up in?
14. How do you approach each story?
15. How does the website ensure objectivity when your reports are based on what you get?
16. How do you deal with the lack of press accreditation?
17. What do you tell people who want to join Malaysiakini?
18. What drives you? What made you this way?
19. What is your vision?
20. How do you come to this vision and how do you infuse this vision to your journalists?
21. How do you maintain your credibility?
22. What sort of sacrifice do you have to put up?
23. What are some of the challenges ahead?

References

A-G outraged over prank (2005, April 2). *New Straits Times*, p. 3.

Atkinson, P., & Hammersley, M. (1994). Ethnography and Participant observation. In Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 1-14). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Beaudoin, C. E., & Thorson, E. (2001). *LA Times* offered as model for foreign news coverage. *Newspaper Research Journal, 22* (1), 80-93.

Bennett, A. (2004). Case study methods: Design, use and comparative advantage. In D. F. Sprinz & Y. Wolinsky-Nahmias (Eds.) *Models, numbers, and cases: Methods for studying international relations* (pp. 19-55). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Berkowitz, D. (1990). Refining the gatekeeping metaphor for local television news. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 34* (1), 55-69.

Breed, W. (1955). Social control in the newsroom: A functional analysis. *Social Forces, 33* (4), 326-335.

Buckalew, J. K. (1969). News elements and selection by television news editors. *Journal of Broadcasting, 14*, 47-54.

Call to maintain dignity of Muslim divorce procedure (2003, July 28). Retrieved from *Malaysiakini.com www.malaysiakini.com/news/2003072800111479.php* (Retrieval date: July 30, 2003).

Chang, T. K., & Lee, J. W. (1992). Factors affecting gatekeepers' selection of foreign news: A national survey of newspaper editors. *Journalism Quarterly, 69*, 554-561.

Chibnall, S. (1977). *Law and order news: An analysis of crime reporting in the British Press*. London, UK: Tavistock.

CJ: Seniority not sole criterion (2003, July 24). Retrieved from *New Straits Times www.nst. com,my/Current_News/NST/Friday/National/20030725074609* (Retrieval date: July 30, 2003).

Dr M: Don't use SMS to declare divorce (2003, July 30). *The Sun*, p. 2.

Dr M expresses unease over use of SMS in Muslim divorce case (2003, July 30). Retrieved from *The Star* thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2003/7/30/nation/5949480&sec=nation (Retrieval date: July 30, 2003).

Eckman, A., & Lindlof, T. (2003). Negotiating the gray lines: An ethnographic case study of organizational conflict between advertorials and news. *Journalism Studies, 4* (1), 65- 77.

Ellul, J. (1965). *Propaganda*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Emmanuel, T., & Mohamed, S. G. (2001, March 15). Police lodge report against Malaysiakini, Pas and Keadilan over death claims. *New Straits Times*, p. 1.

Europa World Year Book (2001). London: Europa.

Fetterman, D. M. (1989). Ethnography: Step by step. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Gans, H. J. (1979). *Deciding what's news*. NY: Pantheon.

George, C. (2002). Mahathir's paradox. *Foreign Policy, 133*, 100.

George, C. (2006). Contentious journalism and the Internet: Towards democratic discourse in Malaysia and Singapore. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Gieber, W. (1956). Across the desk: A study of 16 telegraph editors. *Journalism Quarterly, 33*, 423-432.

Golden-Biddle, K., & Locke, K. (1993). Appealing work: An investigation of how ethnographic texts convince. *Organization Science, 4* (4), 595-616.

Government to take action against Malaysiakini (2005, April 13). *New Straits Times*, p. 14.

Hall, S. (1992). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.) Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies 1972-79 (2nd edition) (pp. 128-138). London, UK: Routledge

Haruta, A., & Hallahan, K. (2003). Cultural issues in airline crisis communications: A Japan-US comparative study. *Asian Journal of Communication, 13* (2), 122-150.

Internet newspaper strays from the truth (2001, February 16). *New Straits Times*, p. 5.

Judicial promotions: 'No justice for judge' (2003, July 25). Retrieved from *Malaysiakini.com www.malaysiakini.com/news/2003072500111447.php* (Retrieval date: July 30, 2003).

KL defends raid on online paper (2003, January 22). *The Straits Times*, p. A9.

Lee, S. (2002, March 28). Malaysiakini admits receiving funds. *New Straits Times*, p. 12.

Lindlof, T. R. (1995). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Logging: Pahang UMNO not involved (2003, July 23). Retrieved from *New Straits Times www.nst.com.my/Current_News/NST/Thursday/National/20030724074600* (Retrieval date: July 30, 2003).

Malaysiakini readership survey (2003, March). Obtained from *Malaysiakini.com*

Malaysiakini.com Project Proposal 2003. Obtained from *Malaysiakini.com*.

Mahathir: My credibility's at stake if I don't go (2003, July 28). Retrieved from

Malaysiakini.com *www.malaysiakini.com/news/20030772800111472.php* (Retrieval date: July 30, 2003).

Mahathir steps into SMS divorce row (2003, July 29). Retrieved from *Malaysiakini.com www. malaysiakini.com/news/2003072900111488.php* (Retrieval date: July 30, 2003).

McCargo, D. (2003). *Media and politics in Pacific Asia*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.

McCracken, D. G. (1988). *The long interview*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage

Media groups will face action for spreading lies (2001, May 24). *New Straits* Times, p. 8.

Merrill, J. (2000). Social stability and harmony: A new mission for the press? *Asian Journal of Communication, 10* (2), 33-52.

New online paper tests KL press limits (2000, January 22). *The Straits Times*, p. 53.

Ostini, J., & Fung, A. Y. H. (2002). Beyond the four theories of the Press: A new model of national media systems. *Mass Communication and Society, 5* (1), 41-56.

Parsons, P. (1997). Xinhua news agency: Reporting the world, China-style. *Mass Communication Review, 24* (3), 71-84.

Parsons, P., & Xu, X. G. (2001). News framing of the Chinese Embassy Bombing by the *People's Daily* and the *New York Times. Asian Journal of Communication, 11* (1), 51- 67.

Peterson, S. (1979). Foreign news gatekeepers and criteria of newsworthiness. *Journalism Quarterly, 56*, 116-125.

Plate, T. (2001, November 17). Getting the scoop from Asia. *The Straits Times*, p. 24.

Plowman, K. D., Re Velle, C., Meirovich, S., Pien, M., Stemple, R., Sheng, V., & Fay, K. (1995). Walgreens: A case study in health care issues and conflict resolution. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 7* (4), 231-258.

Police lodge report against Malaysiakini (2006, August 3). *New Straits Times*, p. 2

Police raid offices of online newspaper (2003, January 21). *The Straits Times*, p. A8.

Prime Minister delights Chinese businessmen with witty, frank answers (2003, July 28). Retrieved from *New Straits Times www.nst.com.my/Current_News/NST/Tuesday/ National/20030729081457/* (Retrieval date: July 30, 2003).

Rais: E-messages not legally binding (2003, August 1). *The Sun*, p. 2.

Reese, S. D., & Ballinger, J. (2001). The roots of a sociology of news: Remembering Mr Gates and social control in the newsroom. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 78* (4), 641-658.

Roberts, M. S., & Bantimaroudis, P. (1997). Gatekeepers in international news. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 2* (2), 62-77.

Shoemaker, P. J. (1991). *Gatekeeping*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Shoemaker, P. J. (1996). 'Media Gatekeeping.' In M.B. Salwen & D.W. Stacks (Eds.), *An integrated approach to communication theory and research* (pp. 79-91). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Shoemaker, P. J., Eichholz, E., Kim, E., & Wrigley, B. (2001). Individual and routine forces in Gatekeeping. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 78* (2), 233-246.

Shoemaker, P. J., & Reese, S. D. (1996). *Mediating the message*. NY:Longman.

Siebert, F. S., Peterson, T., & Schramm, W. (1953). *Four theories of the Press*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Singh, B. (2001). The media environment in Malaysia. *Media Asia, 28* (2), 99-96.

Stacks, D. W. (2002). Primer of public relations research. New York: Guilford.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Taylor, M., & Kent, M. L. (1999). Challenging assumption of international public relations: When the government is the most important public. *Public Relations Review, 25* (2), 131-141.

Tong, Y. S. (2004). Malaysiakini: Threading a tightrope of political pressure and market factors. In S. Gan, J. Gomez, & U. Johannen (Eds.). *Asian cyberactivism: Freedom of expression and media censorship* (pp. 270-317). Singapore: Friedrich Naumann Foundation.

Tuggle, C.A., & Huffman, S. (1999). Live news reporting: Professional judgment or technological pressure? A national survey of television news directors and senior reporters. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 43* (4), 492-511.

UMNO Pahang given multi-million logging concessions (2003, July 21). Retrieved from *Malaysiakini.com www.malaysiakini.com/news/2003072100111354.php* (Retrieval date: July 30, 2003).

UUM calls for probe into Malaysiakini letter (2001, July 11). *New Straits Times*, p. 3.

White, D. M. (1950). The 'gatekeeper': A case study in the selection of news. *Journalism Quarterly, 27*, 383-390.

Xu, X. G., & Parsons, P. (1997). The image-making news flow between China and the United States. *Mass Communication Review, 24* (3), 57-70.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Zaharom, N. (1996). Rhetoric and realities: Malaysian television policy in an era of globalization. *Asian Journal of Communication, 6* (1), 43-64.

Zaharom, N. (2000). Globalized theories and national controls: The state, the market, and the Malaysian media. In Curran, J., & Park, M. (Eds). *De-westernizing media studies* (pp. 139-153). London: Routledge.

Zaharom, N., & Wang, L. K. (2004). Ownership, control, and the Malaysian media. In P. N.

Thomas & Zaharom, N. (Eds.). *Who owns the media? Global trends and local resistances* (pp. 249-270). Penang, Malaysia: Southbound.

AUGUSTINE PANG PhD, conducts his program of teaching and research at the Missouri School of Journalism, University of Missouri-Columbia. Gus' research focuses on crisis communication, image repair, and media sociology and systems. He has published in refereed journals, and has won several top paper awards at leading international conferences.   Email: *PangA@missouri.edu*