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The Battle of Narratives: Mainstream vs. Alternative Media Framing of Anwar Ibrahim

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ABSTRACT

The 15th Malaysian General Election (GE15) in 2022 marked a pivotal moment in the nation's political landscape, culminating in Malaysia's first-ever hung parliament and the subsequent formation of a unity government led by Anwar Ibrahim. Throughout this period, the online media played a crucial role in shaping public perception. This study compares Anwar Ibrahim's portrayal in mainstream and alternative media, focusing on *Utusan Malaysia* and *Harakah Daily* during the GE campaign. Employing a mixed-methods content analysis, the research integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative analysis examines the frequency of news coverage and the sources cited, while the qualitative component explores dominant themes and the degree of bias in media representations of Anwar Ibrahim. The study used purposive sampling to collect relevant news articles published between November 5 and November 18, 2022. The findings reveal notable differences in framing between the two news portals: *Utusan Malaysia* has largely reflected establishment narratives, whereas *Harakah Daily* offered a divergent perspective. The study uncovers patterns of bias and favouritism, illustrating how media ownership and political affiliations influence news narratives. By contributing to academic discourse on media bias and framing in Malaysia, this research offers valuable insights into how political figures are represented across different media landscapes. The findings underscore the profound impact of media framing on public perception and democratic discourse, highlighting the critical importance of media literacy and informed engagement with news content.

Keywords: *Media framing, Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysian General Election, mainstream media, alternative media.*

INTRODUCTION

The 15th Malaysian General Election (GE15), held in November 2022, marked a milestone in the nation's political trajectory. For the first time in its electoral history, Malaysia experienced a hung parliament and ultimately formed a unity government under the leadership of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim (Saleem, 2023). Throughout this politically elusive period, the media, particularly digital news platforms, emerged as a central force in shaping public discourse and influencing voters' perceptions (Moten, 2023). Mainstream media outlets such as *Utusan Malaysia* are widely recognized for their alignment with pro-establishment narratives, while alternative platforms like *Harakah Daily*, which maintains affiliations with the opposition party Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), often provide counter-narratives that challenge dominant political paradigms. This media upshot necessitates a critical exploration of how each outlet constructs political imagery, particularly concerning figures such as Anwar Ibrahim, whose emergence as a consensus leader was instrumental to the post-election political settlement.

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In Malaysia's politically polarised landscape, public perceptions and voter behaviour can be significantly influenced by the media portrayals of leaders. Anwar Ibrahim, as the central figure in forming the unity government after GE15, became a focal point for media coverage. However, mainstream and alternative media portray Anwar differently, reflecting divergent narratives. *Utusan Malaysia* often reflects establishment viewpoints, while *Harakah Daily* aligns with opposition narratives, particularly those of PAS (Hamzah et al., 2023). The lack of specific research on how these two outlets portrayed Anwar Ibrahim during GE15 creates a gap in understanding the media's role in shaping his image in the Malaysian political landscape. This study aims to address this gap by examining the themes and biases in articles published by *Utusan Malaysia* and *Harakah Daily* during GE15.

For this study, "mainstream" and "alternative" serve as analytical categories to distinguish the institutional and media positioning of the two selected news outlets. *Utusan Malaysia* is classified as a mainstream news outlet based on its long-established presence and role within Malaysia's conventional newspaper sector. However, this classification does not imply political neutrality, as the outlet has experienced changes in ownership and political positioning throughout its history. *Harakah Daily* is classified as an alternative news outlet due to its institutional association with the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and its distinct editorial and political positioning outside the conventional commercial news media structure. These classifications are used to establish the study's comparative context rather than to suggest that either outlet represents a homogeneous or politically neutral media category.

Accordingly, this study intends to investigate the representation of Anwar Ibrahim within *Utusan Malaysia* and *Harakah Daily* during the GE15 campaign period, to uncover underlying editorial biases and ideological orientations manifested within their coverage (Selvanathan & Lickel, 2020). In politically contentious contexts such as general elections, media narratives not only disseminate information but also actively shape political perceptions and reinforce partisan loyalties. As a highly controversial yet central figure in Malaysian politics, Anwar Ibrahim's media portrayal offers an analytical lens for assessing broader issues of media impartiality, legitimacy, and the integrity of democratic discourse (Liang & Tiung, 2024).

Deeply polarised media framing during GE15 has produced a scattered political narrative, and its impact continues to shape the current 2026 political landscape. As the unity government enters its fourth year of administration, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's position has drawn more attention and has been debated intensely in public discourse and the media. This stems from frustration among PH supporters who feel the promised systemic reforms have still not been fully realised. This growing dissatisfaction fuels speculation about an earlier GE16, especially amid rising conflicts among coalition partners in the unity government (Rahimy, 2026).

Media and Political Communication

The media serves as a vital channel for political communication, acting as an essential intermediary between political elites and the public. The emergence of the Internet and digital platforms has profoundly reshaped political discourse by enabling more immediate, reciprocal, and participatory exchanges of information. This digital transformation empowers citizens to actively engage with political messages, often through real-time comments and responses, thereby enhancing the interactive nature of political communication (Podkowińska, 2018).

Main players in the political arena utilize the media in both passive and active ways. On one hand, they rely on media coverage to gauge public sentiment and identify pressing societal concerns; on the other, they strategically use media channels to communicate their agendas and build public support (Blumler, 2019). However, this evolving media landscape presents significant challenges, notably the declining availability and quality of political information, followed by growing media concentration that limits content diversity. These conditions increase segmentation and ideological partisanship within the political communication sphere (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

The advent of social media has further complicated the informational environment by facilitating the dissemination of false information or fake news, and hoaxes. These exploitative tactics are often incorporated into political communication strategies, with the potential to influence public views and intensify societal tensions (Oparaugo, 2021).

According to Ahmad. et al (2022), the creation of a digital "5th estate" is due to the expansion of social media and alternative news platforms. This shift is reshaping how political discourse operates in Malaysia by providing an external check on the government. For example, in GE14, Ahmad et al. (2022) found that online public discourse on alternative platforms was instrumental in rallying opposition support and predicting electoral outcomes, demonstrating the power of netizen-fueled media.

Moreover, media content plays a substantial role in shaping political attitudes and behaviour. This influence is neither uniform nor direct, as a range of contextual and individual-level variables moderate and mediate it (Hoewe & Peacock, 2020). The media thus serves in a dual role in democratic involvement: it can foster civic participation by informing the public, yet it may also contribute to political disengagement when entertainment is prioritized over meaningful political discourse. Such trends pose profound implications for the health and vibrancy of democratic processes (Moretti, 2010).

Media Framing and Political Leaders

Framing theory is pivotal to understanding how mainstream and alternative media framed and represented Anwar Ibrahim during Malaysia's 2022 General Election. According to Entman (1993), media framing selects and highlights parts of reality while leaving others out, ultimately shaping how the public perceives it. Because media sources can portray leaders as reformists, threats, or controversial individuals based on editorial policies and ideological interests, this is especially important for political figures. Furthermore, by shaping narratives that influence public sentiment and election outcomes, Matthes (2012) shows how framing shapes political discourse.

Restrictive government legislation, such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, and the Sedition Act 1948, has heavily shaped mainstream news framing in Malaysia. They face organisational constraints and pressure from authorities that limit their ability to serve society with balanced news, as these laws are used to regulate the media under the guise of maintaining social stability (Mat Husain et al., 2024). This aligns with previous findings by Rosli and Sani (2021), who noted that mainstream media reporting during general elections historically exhibits a strong pro-government bias attributed to direct linkages with political elites.

In the Malaysian context, mainstream and alternative media portray Anwar Ibrahim very differently. Mainstream media, often aligned with government influence, have historically framed Anwar using negative narratives, such as political instability or personal

controversies, linking with ruling party interests (Weiss, 2013). In contrast, alternative media, such as *Malaysiakini* and *Free Malaysia Today*, tend to frame Anwar as a reformist leader advocating for democratic change (Tapsell, 2018). This aligns with Van Gorp's (2007) argument that media frames are culturally and politically constructed, reinforcing existing narratives that serve different stakeholders.

Additionally, Trimble's (2007) research on media visibility in political leadership contests provides an insightful lens to analyse Anwar's coverage during the election. Just as gender and political affiliation shaped media narratives in Canada, Anwar's long-standing opposition status and past political struggles shaped how Malaysian media portrayed him. By comparing how mainstream and alternative media framed Anwar, this research aims to uncover biases, dominant narratives, and the broader implications of media influence on political perceptions in Malaysia.

This study adopts Entman's (1993) framing theory as the conceptual framework for examining how the selected news outlets construct and present the issue under investigation. Following Entman, framing is operationalised through four core functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. These functions guide the identification and interpretation of the news elements examined in the content analysis. The themes identified in the articles capture how particular aspects of the issue are defined and made salient, while the sources cited provide insight into how responsibility and causal interpretations are attributed. Coverage slant, categorised as positive, negative, or neutral, is used to examine the evaluative or moral dimension of the framing. References to proposed actions, responses, or solutions are examined as indicators of the treatment recommendation function. Frequency and percentage are used descriptively to show the distribution of these framing elements across the selected news outlets.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to content analysis, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Mixed methods were adopted to holistically address the research objectives by combining the strengths of both approaches (Bryman, 2012). While the quantitative analysis provides measurable data on coverage frequency and source use, the qualitative analysis offers a detailed understanding of themes, tone, and bias. This dual approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of media framing, addressing both "what" is being reported about Anwar Ibrahim and "how" it is being presented (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). By integrating these methods, the study provides a robust analysis of the media's role in shaping public perceptions of Anwar Ibrahim during Malaysia's 15th General Election. The quantitative component addresses the following objectives.

1) To determine the frequency of news coverage related to Anwar Ibrahim during Malaysia's 15th General Election.

The study measures how often articles mention Anwar Ibrahim across the selected news portals (*Utusan Malaysia* and *Harakah Daily*) during the election period. This provides insight into the level of media attention each platform gives to Anwar Ibrahim.

2) To identify the sources used in reporting about Anwar Ibrahim during Malaysia's 15th General Election.

The analysis includes counting and categorizing the sources cited in the articles (e.g., politicians, experts, anonymous sources) to understand the reliance on different voices in framing Anwar Ibrahim.

3) To evaluate the extent of bias or favouritism in selected news portals' portrayal of Anwar Ibrahim.

The quantitative analysis examines the tone, language, and framing devices (e.g., headline choices, adjectives, and imagery) used in the articles to uncover implicit or explicit bias, favouritism, or criticism in the portrayal of Anwar Ibrahim. This interpretive analysis is crucial for identifying subtle rhetorical strategies and underlying political biases in the media narratives (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This systematic measurement enables objective comparisons of coverage patterns across the selected platforms (Riffe et al., 2019). While the qualitative component focuses on addressing the third research objective:

1) To analyse the themes of news reporting on Anwar Ibrahim during Malaysia's 15th General Election.

A thematic analysis explored recurring themes in the news coverage, such as portrayals of Anwar Ibrahim as a reformist leader, a controversial political figure, or other narrative constructions. A theme is an idea or basic issue that controls the news story. These themes are categorized into categories based on the pre-test that was conducted earlier. During the pre-test, the coders were required to find the theme for each paragraph based on the emergent coding method, in which they had to decide what the possible theme was for each paragraph analysed. The researcher then arranged the emerging themes and built new categories by deleting overlapping themes. Before forming the categorical themes, the researcher created a thorough reference to ensure there would be no confusion during the coding session. In this research, the coders were also required to extract examples from the articles to support the theme category they chose. The category of themes selected by the researcher for this study is shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Themes of articles

No.	Themes
1	The Negative Image of Anwar Ibrahim
2	Anwar Ibrahim and DAP
3	Anwar’s Stand
4	Anwar’s Leadership

The population consists of online news articles reporting on Anwar Ibrahim during Malaysia's 15th General Election, published by mainstream and alternative media outlets. Specifically, the study focuses on articles from *Utusan Malaysia* (mainstream media) and *Harakah Daily* (alternative media) news portals. These platforms were selected based on their significant readership and influence in shaping political discourse in Malaysia.

The decision to focus on online news articles is informed by Malaysia's increasing reliance on digital platforms for news consumption, driven by growing internet penetration and a preference for immediate access to information (MCMC, 2022). Online news portals provide a dynamic space for analysing media portrayals, offering a broader and faster dissemination of content compared to traditional print media. By analysing these outlets, the study captures how different types of media frame Anwar Ibrahim, reflecting their potential role in influencing public perceptions during the election period.

This study utilizes purposive sampling to select articles that are most relevant to the research objectives. Purposive sampling is appropriate for this study as it allows the researchers to focus on articles that directly address the portrayal of Anwar Ibrahim, ensuring the data aligns closely with the research questions (Patton, 2015). The sample consists of news articles published between November 5, 2022, and November 18, 2022, covering Malaysia's 15th General Election campaign reporting. This timeframe is chosen to analyse how Anwar Ibrahim was framed during a highly significant political event. Articles are selected from the digital archives of *Utusan Malaysia* and *Harakah Daily* to represent mainstream and alternative media, respectively. Inclusion criteria include articles that explicitly mention Anwar Ibrahim in the headlines. The sample includes news reports, editorials, and opinion pieces related to his political campaign, leadership, or public statements during the election period. This sampling strategy ensures balanced representation of media narratives from both mainstream and alternative perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of how Anwar Ibrahim was portrayed across media contexts during the 15th General Election.

The researchers conducted an inter-coder reliability analysis, as Krippendorff (2004) suggests that researchers can evaluate the reliability of their study by replicating their research under different conditions and analysing the consistency in interpretations, responses, and usage of the data. This can be achieved by involving multiple researchers with diverse perspectives, conducting the study in various settings, or utilizing different but equivalent measurement tools. A high degree of agreement among these replications indicates strong reliability. To ensure coding reliability, at least two independent researchers must code the same content (Mouter & Vonk Noordegraaf, 2012). The inter-coder reliability was 0.78. This proves the reliability of the two coders. As Stevens, Lyles and Berke (2014) note, content analyses published in the communications literature from 1994 to 1998 addressed reliability in nearly 70 per cent of studies. The researchers have used the Holsti (1969) formula to calculate inter-coder reliability. According to Holsti (1969), intercoder reliability can be calculated using the following formula:

$$CR = \frac{2M}{N^1+N^2}$$

where:

- CR = coefficient of reliability
- M = number of coding decisions on which the two coders agree
- N^1 = total number of coding decisions made by Coder 1
- N^2 = total number of coding decisions made by Coder 2

In this study, the two coders independently coded 63 news articles each and agreed on 49 coding decisions. Therefore:

$$CR = \frac{2(49)}{63+63}$$

$$CR = \frac{98}{126}$$

$$CR = 0.78$$

Thus, the intercoder reliability coefficient was 0.78.

This test showed that the reliability coefficient is 0.78. According to Holsti (1969), the result obtained for the inter-coder reliability test using this formula must be 0.7 and above. This is because it indicates that the reliability test is reliable. Thus, the 0.78 obtained in this pilot study signifies acceptable coding accuracy and reliability.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section provides an in-depth examination of how Utusan Malaysia, a mainstream media outlet, and Harakah Daily, an alternative media source, framed Anwar Ibrahim. The analysis highlights potential biases, media ownership influences, and political affiliations that shaped news narratives. By integrating both statistical and thematic analysis, this study aims to uncover the implicit messages conveyed through media framing and their impact on public perception during GE15.

i) The Frequency of News

This study analyses the media portrayal of Anwar Ibrahim during Malaysia's 15th General Election, focusing on the two-week election campaign period as covered by *Utusan Malaysia* and *Harakah Daily*. We collected 47 relevant news articles from both news portals: 35 (approximately 74%) from Utusan Malaysia and 12 (approximately 26%) from *Harakah Daily*. The data indicate that *Utusan Malaysia* devoted significantly more coverage to the topic compared to *Harakah Daily*. This disparity suggests that *Utusan Malaysia* placed greater editorial emphasis on Anwar Ibrahim's portrayal during the election period.

Table 2: Frequency of pertaining articles in analysed news portals

News portal	Articles, n	Percentage
Utusan Malaysia	35	74.47
Harakah Daily	12	25.53
Total	47	100.00

ii) News Sources

Excellent news sources play an important role in a newspaper's reporting. They reflect a newspaper's direction, development, and bias, and without news sources, there would be no news. Yong and Md Sidin (2012) stated that sources play an important role in determining the reporting and further development of a news story.

Table 3: Differences of news sources used in both news portals

News source	Utusan Malaysia	Harakah Daily	Total
Ruling government leader	7 (20%)	0 (0%)	7 (14.89%)
Opposition leaders	21 (60%)	6 (50%)	27 (57.45%)
Editor or author's opinion	5 (14.28%)	3 (25%)	8 (17%)
Academicians	1 (2.85%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.13%)
Anonymous	0 (0%)	1 (8.3%)	1 (2.13%)
Election candidates	1 (2.85%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.13%)
General public	0 (0%)	2 (16.66%)	2 (4.26%)
Total	35 (100%)	12 (100%)	47 (100%)

Note: Values are n (%). Percentages are based on the number of articles in each news portal (Utusan Malaysia, n = 35; Harakah Daily, n = 12) or the full sample for the Total column (N = 47). Percentages are reported as in the source table and may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Table 3 shows clear differences in news-source selection between *Utusan Malaysia* and *Harakah Daily*, reflecting their distinct editorial and political orientations. Opposition leaders were the most frequently cited sources in both news portals, making up 57.45% of total sources. *Utusan Malaysia* relied on them the most (60%), possibly to present a critical perspective, while *Harakah Daily* cited them in 50% of its coverage, reinforcing its pro-opposition stance. In contrast, Utusan Malaysia cited ruling government leaders exclusively (20%), while *Harakah Daily* did not reference them at all, further highlighting their contrasting alignments. These findings align with studies indicating that Malaysian mainstream newspapers, particularly Malay-language ones, have historically favored government narratives while alternative media have provided opposition perspectives (Abbott, 2011; Brown, 2005).

Editorial and author opinions were more common in *Harakah Daily* (25%) than in *Utusan Malaysia* (14.28%), suggesting that *Harakah Daily* incorporated more subjective commentary and analysis to shape its narratives. Interestingly, both news portals rarely cited academicians (2.13% total), election candidates (2.13%), or anonymous sources (2.13%), showing little reliance on expert or independent perspectives. *Harakah Daily*, however, included public voices (16.66%), whereas Utusan Malaysia did not feature them at all, suggesting *Harakah Daily's* attempt to present grassroots viewpoints. This pattern reflects previous findings that Malaysian opposition-linked media often prioritize public and alternative sources over government officials (Steele, 2009; Kamaruddin et al., 2016; Mohamed, 2017; Selvanathan & Lickel, 2020)

Overall, the findings show how Utusan Malaysia and Harakah Daily framed their election coverage through political bias. *Utusan Malaysia* maintained its traditional pro-government stance by including ruling party leaders and focusing on political elites, while *Harakah Daily* emphasized opposition voices, editorial opinions, and public perspectives. Both news portals showed limited engagement with neutral or independent sources, suggesting a tendency toward partisan reporting rather than balanced journalism.

This supports previous research highlighting how media ownership influences news coverage in Malaysia, with government-affiliated outlets prioritizing ruling party sources and alternative media offering a counter-narrative (George, 2006; Netto, 2002). Ahmad et al. (2022) also support this finding. The study compares how a mainstream and an alternative newspaper framed the 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) financial scandal and politicised the issue before and after the historic change in the ruling party in Malaysia's 2018 general election. The study found a tendency of the mainstream, that is, The Star, to quote ruling party politicians. The Star also adopted a formal stance in reporting 1MDB-linked events. However, the alternative Malaysiakini was found to use more varied news sources and a personalised stance to engage readers.

iii) News Slant

The table below presents findings related to the fourth objective of this study: to assess the degree of bias or favouritism in the portrayal of Anwar Ibrahim by the selected news portals. To achieve this, the researchers conducted an article-level analysis of the collected news articles. The researchers independently evaluated each of the 47 articles to determine its overall tone, categorised as positive, negative, or neutral. The slant was determined by the article's overall tone and presentation, rather than the isolated viewpoint of any single quoted source. Articles containing both positive and negative elements were classified according to the dominant tone of the overall article. Images and other visual elements were not included

in the assessment, as the analysis focused exclusively on the news articles as textual units. This evaluation aimed to identify the slant of news coverage across both mainstream and alternative media platforms. Representative news samples are provided to demonstrate how the coding criteria were applied.

Table 4: Difference in the bias slant of news articles in both news portals

News coverage	Utusan Malaysia		Harakah Daily	
	n	%	n	%
Neutral	5	14.29	0	0
Positive	19	54.29	0	0
Negative	11	31.43	12	100
Total	35	100	12	100

The results reveal a significant difference in how *Utusan Malaysia* and *Harakah Daily* portrayed Anwar Ibrahim during the 2022 Malaysian General Election, highlighting clear patterns of bias in their news coverage. *Utusan Malaysia* presented a mix of positive (54.29%), negative (31.43%), and neutral (14.29%) portrayals, suggesting a more varied stance despite its traditional alignment with the ruling party. The presence of positive coverage indicates that the news portals provided some space for favorable narratives about Anwar, possibly reflecting shifts in political dynamics or an attempt to appeal to a wider readership.

In contrast, *Harakah Daily* exclusively framed Anwar negatively, with 100% of its coverage portraying him unfavorably. This suggests a consistent editorial stance against Anwar, likely influenced by the news portal's political affiliations. Meanwhile, *Utusan Malaysia* also included a significant portion of negative coverage (31.43%), aligning with previous research indicating that mainstream newspapers often reflect government-friendly narratives. Additionally, neutral reporting was minimal, with *Utusan Malaysia* having only 14.29% neutral coverage and *Harakah Daily* having none, further emphasizing the partisan nature of both publications.

Themes of News

Table 5: Themes of the news

Theme	Utusan Malaysia		Harakah Daily	
	n	%	n	%
The negative image of Anwar	11	31.43	6	50
Anwar Ibrahim and DAP	2	5.71	2	16.67
Anwar's stand	5	14.29	2	16.67
Anwar's leadership	17	48.57	2	16.67
Total	35	100	12	100

Here are the findings based on the four themes identified in your study on how Anwar Ibrahim was portrayed in *Utusan Malaysia* and *Harakah Daily* during Malaysia's 22nd General Election:

a) The Negative Image of Anwar

Both *Utusan Malaysia* and *Harakah Daily* portrayed Anwar Ibrahim negatively but with different focuses. *Utusan Malaysia* reported a lower percentage (31.43%) than *Harakah Daily* (50%). In *Utusan Malaysia*, Anwar was often criticized for his leadership weaknesses, political decisions, and controversial political history. In contrast, Harakah Daily framed Anwar

negatively by linking him to political instability and personal ambition in power struggles. This indicates that while both news portals portrayed him unfavorably, their focus on criticism differed.

> *Pengerusi Pakatan Harapan (PH), Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim dinasihatkan supaya tidak mereka cerita dongeng tentang pencalonan Datuk Mohd. Rashid Hasnon sebagai Timbalan Yang Dipertua Dewan Rakyat.*
> (Utusan Malaysia, November 10, 2022 "Anwar jangan reka cerita dongeng")

> *Ingatkah beliau, selama 7 tahun menjadi Menteri Kewangan Malaysia, tiada satu pun geran dan bantuan yang diberikan kepada Kerajaan Negeri Kelantan bagi tujuan menyelesaikan masalah bekalan air di negeri ini. Apakah jika diberikan mandat, isu ini akan terus selesai umpama 'Hari ini menang, esok minyak akan turun'?*
> (Harakah Daily, November 17,2022 "Anwar gagal sebagai Menteri Kewangan, Penasihat Ekonomi PH")

b) Anwar Ibrahim and DAP

Coverage of Anwar's relationship with DAP was proportionally higher in *Harakah Daily* (16.67%) than in *Utusan Malaysia* (5.71%). In *Utusan Malaysia*, this theme focused on the negative perception among the Malay community, emphasizing the narrative that Anwar's cooperation with DAP could threaten Malay and Islamic interests. Meanwhile, *Harakah Daily* highlighted Anwar's alliance with DAP within the opposition bloc, with the coverage reflecting a negative slant, consistent with the quantitative findings showing that all *Harakah Daily* articles were coded as negative.

> *Anwar mempunyai stamina untuk membawa Malaysia kembali kepada prinsip asas kemerdekaan.*
> (Utusan Malaysia, November 10, 2022 "Anwar paling layak jadi PM - Kit Siang")

> *Kedua-dua pihak dilihat saling mencatur satu sama lain, tetapi lebih menonjol adalah DAP terhadap Anwar sungguhpun Pengerusi Pakatan Harapan (PH) itu cuba menepis. Tiada gunapun Anwar menyangkal, kerana pandangan dan pemahaman kebanyakan rakyat negara ini sudah begitu mengerti watak keduanya.*
> (Harakah Daily, November 12,2022 "Alat DAP: Untuk apa Anwar menafikan?")

c) Anwar's Stand

Both news portals also highlighted Anwar's political stance, with 14.29% coverage in *Utusan Malaysia* and 16.67% in *Harakah Daily*. *Utusan Malaysia* depicted Anwar as committed to social justice and reform, but at times unclear in his political direction. Conversely, *Harakah Daily* portrayed Anwar as inconsistent in his political stance, especially on issues related to Malay privileges and Islam.

> *Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim menafikan akan menjalin kerjasama dengan Pengerusi Barisan Nasional (BN), Datuk Seri Dr. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi selepas Pilihan Raya Umum Ke-15 (PRU15).*
> (Utusan Malaysia, November 8,2022, "Anwar nafi mahu bekerjasama dengan Zahid")

> *Dalam hampir semua edisi ceramah kempennya pada PRU15, Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim sentiasa menegaskan bahawa beliaulah insan terbaik untuk dilantik sebagai Perdana Menteri Malaysia. Kali ini sebagai Perdana Menteri ke-10.*
> (Harakah Daily, November 17, 2022, "Anwar makin galak promosi diri sebagai Perdana Menteri")

d) Anwar's Leadership

Utusan Malaysia covered Anwar's leadership most (48.57%), while Harakah Daily covered it far less (16.67%). *Utusan Malaysia* painted a negative picture, portraying Anwar as an ineffective leader who frequently failed in political maneuvering. In contrast, *Harakah Daily* provided a more neutral assessment, balancing both Anwar's achievements and challenges in Malaysian politics. This contrast reflects the difference between mainstream and alternative media in evaluating Anwar's leadership.

> *Presiden PKR itu berkata, Tambun dipilih sebagai tempat menyampaikan amanat terakhir PH berbanding Putrajaya kerana Tambun bakal dijadikan markas dan pusat gerakan baharu Malaysia.*
> (Utusan Malaysia, November 15, 2022, "Anwar Pilih Tambun Sampaikan Amanat Terakhir PRU15 Berbanding Putrajaya")

> *PAS bukan sahaja menolak DAP, malah tidak boleh menerima PKR yang oportunis iaitu hanya mencari peluang dan kesempatan termasuk asyik meminta untuk dilantik menjadi Perdana Menteri.*
> (Harakah Daily, November 13,2022, "PKR oportunis, Anwar meminta-minta jawatan PM")

Discussion

According to Mohd Nor et al. (2020), the adoption of communication technology has redefined how political entities interact with the public, shifting from traditional print media to evolving two-way interactive platforms. Political information distributed online is now considered an essential commodity for an effective democracy, as it strongly affects how modern Malaysians vote and understand complex political issues.

In this study, the disproportionate frequency of articles about Anwar Ibrahim in Utusan Malaysia compared to Harakah Daily suggests a deliberate editorial focus, possibly reflecting institutional priorities and political affiliations. With almost 75% of total coverage coming from *Utusan Malaysia*, the mainstream media outlet devoted more editorial space to shaping public opinions or perceptions of Anwar during the campaign period. This examination aligns with George (2006), who notes that state-aligned media in Malaysia tend to dominate the news agenda to influence political discourse. The frequency imbalance shows

different levels of emphasis and indicates how political figures can be both advantaged and disadvantaged during elections through access to a variety of media platforms, depending on outlets' preferences and how they align with the political landscape.

In analysing news sources, a clear discrepancy in sourcing practices emerged. *Utusan Malaysia* frequently cited ruling government leaders and political elites, while *Harakah Daily* inserted more grassroots voices, such as the general public. This finding supports Steele (2009), who observed that alternative media often amplify voices sidelined by mainstream discourse. Notably, no outlet relied significantly on neutral or expert sources like academics or independent analysts, validating previous critiques of Malaysian journalism for lacking diverse perspectives (Abbott, 2011). This reliance on political figures rather than expert or public-interest perspectives may narrow the scope of political debate and compromise journalistic objectivity.

The slant of news coverage further demonstrates the partisan nature of both news portals. *Utusan Malaysia* offered a mix of positive, negative, and neutral portrayals, whereas *Harakah Daily* portrayed Anwar Ibrahim exclusively in a negative light. This finding underscores the ideological polarization between mainstream and alternative media. According to Hanitzsch et al. (2011), such polarization is symptomatic of media systems operating under politically aligned ownership structures, where journalism becomes a tool for partisan advocacy rather than public service. The complete absence of positive or neutral portrayals in *Harakah Daily* suggests that editorial direction was guided more by political motivations than journalistic balance, mirroring global concerns about the rise of advocacy journalism in competitive electoral contexts (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). Despite their partisan leanings, alternative platforms remain crucial in democratising information, serving as watchdogs that offer diverse perspectives and highlight issues often underrepresented by mainstream outlets (Yong et al., 2025).

The thematic framing analysis of Anwar Ibrahim across both news portals reveals how public perception is substantially influenced by the construction of strategic media narratives. The dominant theme in *Utusan Malaysia* was “Anwar’s leadership” (48.57%), often presented with a critical lens that questioned his effectiveness and consistency. Meanwhile, *Harakah Daily* focused on “the negative image of Anwar” (50%) and consistently framed him as a destabilizing force in Malaysian politics. Although both news portals highlighted negative aspects, their thematic concerns diverged: *Utusan* criticized Anwar’s leadership and party alignment, while *Harakah* framed Anwar as self-serving and politically opportunistic. This supports Fairclough’s (1995) notion that thematic choices in political discourse are often ideologically loaded and designed to align with the media outlet’s political stance. Interestingly, both news portals gave attention to Anwar’s relationship with DAP, a sensitive issue in Malaysian ethno-religious politics, using it to amplify narratives that could alienate Malay-Muslim voters, a technique consistent with what Entman (2007) describes as “strategic framing” in political communication. These findings suggest that rather than informing voters with a balanced thematic focus, both news portals curated selective themes to reinforce their existing political biases.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the deep-rooted partisan dynamics within Malaysia's media landscape, particularly apparent in the divergent portrayals of Anwar Ibrahim during the 15th General Election by *Utusan Malaysia* and *Harakah Daily*. The quantitative imbalance in coverage, where *Utusan Malaysia* produced nearly three times more articles than *Harakah*

Daily, reflects not only editorial prioritization but also the wider issue of media ownership and its influence on political reporting. The reliance on politically affiliated sources and the minimal inclusion of independent perspectives highlight a persistent challenge in achieving balanced journalism in Malaysia. These findings align with recent analyses indicating that media ownership structures and political affiliations continue to formulate news narratives, often at the expense of journalistic neutrality (Saad, 2023; International Federation of Journalists, 2024).

Furthermore, the thematic and tonal analyses reveal a media environment where reporting is heavily influenced by political allegiances. *Utusan Malaysia*'s mixed portrayal of Anwar, juxtaposed with *Harakah Daily*'s uniformly negative coverage, exemplifies the lack of neutrality in political reporting. This partisan approach not only shapes public opinion but also undermines the media's role as a democratic institution. The recent decline in Malaysia's press freedom ranking, dropping from 73rd to 107th in the World Press Freedom Index, further emphasizes the need for reforms to promote media independence and credibility (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). To foster a more informed electorate and a healthier democratic process, Malaysia must address these systemic issues within its media framework.

Looking ahead, as Saad (2023) claims, the deeply polarised media framing observed during GE15 sets a concerning precedent for the highly anticipated 16th General Election (GE16). As the unity government navigates its fourth year of administration amid shifting coalition dynamics and public scrutiny over systemic reforms, the partisan framing by both mainstream and alternative media risks further fracturing public sentiment. According to Lokman et al. (2024), if media outlets maintain their current trajectory of prioritizing political allegiances over objective reporting, voter polarization will likely intensify. This dynamic threatens to turn GE16 into a battleground not just of political ideologies, but of media-constructed realities and echo chambers. Therefore, elevating media literacy among voters and demanding rigorous editorial independence are no longer optional, but essential safeguards to ensure a truly democratic, transparent, and informed electoral process in GE16.

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