

BBC suspends FBC shows, CNN denies paid for Najib interview

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By Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 4 — US-based broadcaster CNN has denied it was paid to interview Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak but questions remain about the role played by its anchor John Defterios after the latter's FBC Media programme *World Business* was axed yesterday by rival network CNBC.

The spotlight is on the relationship between FBC Media — the British publicity firm led by media giant Alan Friedman with Defterios still listed as its group president — and broadcasters like CNBC, CNN and the BBC.

As a result of the allegations, BBC has also said it will suspend programmes produced by FBC Media and investigate the company.

Influential Washington-based news website Politico.com reported today a CNN spokesman as saying there had never been any contract between the satellite news channel and Friedman's FBC Media for editorial content, only advertorials that are clearly labelled as such and which run only during the commercial slots.

According to Politico, FBC Media is listed in lobbying reports as having paid tens of thousands of dollars to Washington-based lobbying firm APCO in recent years to lobby on behalf of the Malaysian government.

CNN's denial comes on the heels of rival CNBC's decision to drop its flagship show *World Business*, which has similarly been alleged to have been paid to feature Najib in its prime-time news slots last month after his administration cracked down on a civil rally pushing for cleaner and more honest elections.

Both interviews were conducted by Defterios which has raised eyebrows over his appearance on the rival channels as well as questions over a conflict of interest to his unclear ties with FBC Media.

Defterios was listed as director in the British firm on the FBC Media website before it was stripped down to a one-page fact sheet yesterday, with all information about its board members removed. The information remains available on the whistleblower Sarawak Report website.

CNN told Politico that Defterios had been a full-time employee since March and had cut all ties with FBC Media at that time, but he remains listed as CNBC's managing editor for the just axed *World Business* programme.

In profiles of Defterios available online, he is listed as the group president of FBC Media.

Global broadcasters have been scrambling to contain potential damage after allegations of impropriety surfaced following an expose by whistleblower Sarawak Report, which linked the interviews and other programmes produced by FBC Media as having been paid millions of ringgit by the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition to shine its international image.

"CNN's recent interview with the Malaysian prime minister was set up solely by CNN with the PM's office," Politico reported CNN spokeswoman Lauren Cone as saying in its story today headlined "CNBC drops 'World Business'".

Apart from CNN, FBC Media has also produced editorial content for the UK broadcaster BBC.

The British broadcaster told Politico all independent TV companies are required to sign strict agreements with it to prevent conflicts of interests and that it was not aware of some of the information provided by FBC but will be investigating the claims "as a matter of urgency."

"As a precautionary step, we will not broadcast programmes made by FBC whilst we look into these claims," Politico reported the anonymous BBC spokesman as saying.

Putrajaya and the Sarawak administration under Chief Minister Tan Sri Taib Mahmud have been questioned by the opposition PKR to come clean on the allegation they had paid FBC Media RM15 million a year from public coffers to produce programmes biased towards the BN coalition at federal and state levels on international media.

The Sarawak Report, in a story published three days ago, claimed insider sources revealed Najib "suggested" to Taib that he hire FBC Media to bolster his seemingly flagging popularity after the Sarawak chief minister appeared to suffer a publicity crisis due to allegations of extensive corruption.

Both have not denied the report since it was published by the whistleblower website. FBC Media's dealings with the Malaysian government came to light after supplementary supply Bills showed vast payments made for a "Global Strategic Communications Campaign".

The records showed that between 2008 and 2009, RM57.7 million was paid by the Prime Minister's office to FBC Media for the campaign.

Attempts by *The Malaysian Insider* to contact FBC Media since yesterday to clarify the reports have been unanswered.

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