



Malaysiakini

and the power of independent media in Malaysia



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Janet Steele



Malaysiakini and the Power of Independent Media in Malaysia

Janet Steele

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*For independent journalists
and those who stand with them.*





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The opportunity to serve as “monitor and evaluator” for the International Center for Journalists' citizen journalism project allowed me to spend even more time at *Malaysiakini* and subsidized the cost of travel to Malaysia. Sharon Moshavi (now the director of the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ)) was a generous and accommodating boss, and it was because of her that I had the opportunity to get to know Maran Perianen, Indrani Kopal, Shufiyan Shukur and the Penang “CJs” (citizen journalists) first as colleagues and instructors, and then as friends.

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that short workshops in narrative journalism could be a useful means of talking about the basic principles of journalism. Yvonne Oh and Leni Abdul Latif were always my “angels,” and I am grateful to them both.

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Introduction

On November 10, 2019, *Malaysiakini* held a gala dinner at the Pullman Hotel in the Bangsar neighborhood of Kuala Lumpur. It was the news portal's 20th anniversary, and over 1,000 people had bought tickets for the event, which was open to the public. A mix of subscribers, well-wishers and *Malaysiakini* "alumni," the guests signed in under festive garlands of purple and white balloons. Greeting old friends and former colleagues, they mingled with soft drinks and snacks, and paused to pose for photos in front of a floor-to-ceiling banner bearing *Malaysiakini*'s logo and "news and views that matter" tag line.

At 7pm, the news portal's events team began to usher guests to assigned seats in the ballroom, where dozens of white tables laden with silver chafing dishes reflected the soft pink and purple lights overhead. VIP guests, seated near chief editor Steven Gan and CEO Premesh Chandran, made up a *Who's Who* of the Pakatan Harapan coalition, which had won an unprecedented electoral victory 18 months earlier. Although the attendees included Anwar Ibrahim, Mat Sabu, Elizabeth Wong, Tian Chua and Lim Kit Siang, it is a tradition at *Malaysiakini* that politicians are not invited to give speeches at anniversary dinners.¹

While I did manage to attend the anniversary dinner, with my luggage arriving in Kuala Lumpur only a few hours before I left for the Pullman Hotel, jetlag is not the only reason that I have few recollections of the gala event. The dinner, with its fancy dress, "lucky draw," and comedy performances, bears little relation to what goes on day in and day out at *Malaysiakini*, where I have been doing research since 2007. Despite the news organization's justifiable pride in its 20 years of "telling truth to power," as the backdrop behind the podium

¹ "Malaysiakini co-founders to release half of their shares to a Trust," *Malaysiakini*, Nov. 23, 2019. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/501003>

proclaimed, the day-to-day work of the news organization takes place in far less glamorous circumstances.

Malaysiakini is arguably Malaysia's most important independent news organization. Some, in fact, would say that it is the most important independent news organization in Southeast Asia, rivaling the Philippines' *Rappler* and Indonesia's *Tempo* magazine in its fearlessness.² Founded in 1999 at the very start of *Reformasi*, *Malaysiakini* has received a significant amount of scholarly attention (George 2006; Tong 2004; Chin 2003; Nain 2002). Magazine and newspaper articles have also pointed to its independence, gutsiness and willingness to "[tell] it like it is without having to resort to coded messages." Yet surprisingly, *Malaysiakini* has never been the subject of a book-length study.

This book aims to fill that gap. It is a cultural history of one of the most important media institutions in Malaysia. Based on over 15 years of observation of newsroom practices, close reading of the website, and extensive interviews with editors and reporters, it draws on a tradition of newsroom ethnography that began in the 1970s with sociologist Herbert Gans' seminal work *Deciding What's News* (1979). Gans took a participant-observation approach during ten years of intermittent study of four of New York's premier "journalistic communities"—*Time* and *Newsweek* magazines, the *CBS Evening News* and *NBC Nightly News*. He argued that the news organizations he studied provided a "picture of America," even though this is not what journalists who worked there were paid to do. Although their task was to create "stories" about what they had observed, the outcome of their work could nevertheless be viewed as such a picture (Gans 1979: 5).

In an equally seminal work, Gaye Tuchman (1972) observed that journalists' understanding of objectivity should be seen as a "strategic ritual," a toolkit of approaches and conventions that keep reporters from raising the ire of either their bosses or readers, while keeping the news flowing to the presses. With a set of conventions such as the presentation of conflicting possibilities, strategic use of quotes, provision of supporting evidence and ordering information in line with a shared understanding of news judgment, the lofty (and impossible) ideal of objectivity becomes what she called a "strategic ritual," inoculating journalists from criticism. More recently, Nikki Usher's *Making News at the New York Times* (2014) focused on efforts to steer "the Gray Lady" into the digital age, and how this transformation collided with the demands of the legendary newspaper's more conventional print journalism.

² Interview with Saša Vučinić, founder and first CEO of the Media Development Investment Fund, Apr. 4, 2022.

My own interest in newsroom ethnography began with my 2005 book *Wars Within*, which focused on Indonesia's *Tempo* magazine. Although I was trained as a cultural historian, after a 1997–98 Fulbright in Indonesia—during which I witnessed the fall of Soeharto and the return of *Tempo* to publication—I learned Indonesian, studied Indonesian political history and culture, and spent a subsequent sabbatical year and several summers observing newsroom routines at *Tempo*. The result was a history of the news magazine that emphasized the strategies used by journalists to report on news in ways that were designed to evade the censors. I found that in a world in which government authorities controlled news content with threats of censorship, temporary withdrawal of permits and permanent bannings, journalists learned to utilize “hidden messages,” while Indonesians learned to read between the lines—or “between the lies,” as senior Indonesian editor Aristides Katoppo once put it.

I first became interested in *Malaysiakini* in 2007, when Sim Tze Tzin, now a member of Parliament, took me to the Bangsar office to meet Steven and Prem. Prem's wife, Saira Shameem, knew of my book on *Tempo*, and I was greeted warmly. One thing led to another, and before long I had permission to visit the office and sit in on editorial meetings. That visit led to the first article I published on *Malaysiakini* in 2009, “Professionalism online.” When earlier that year the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) began looking for someone who could “monitor and evaluate” a US government grant to run a citizen journalism program with *Malaysiakini*, Prem recommended me. I was happy to get the job, not only because it would get me to Malaysia more often, but also because I hoped to serve as a bridge between *Malaysiakini* and its American funders. The grant, “A Multimedia News Project for Ethnic Tolerance and Religious Issues in Malaysia,” along with a subsequent one that focused on “Developing Community Reporting” two years later, permitted even closer observation of newsroom practices and enabled me to collect material that became the basis of Chapter 6.

Soon I became known for the chocolate chip cookies I always brought with me whenever I came to Malaysia, something I had started to do during field work at *Tempo* magazine. Although I was working primarily with program coordinator Maran Perianen and *Malaysiakini*'s video team, I nevertheless had a desk in the newsroom and attended morning and evening editorial meetings. In addition to joining *Malaysiakini* journalists and editors for lunches and teatime breaks at Restoran Mydin, I was included in office retreats, social events and meetings with visiting Media Development Loan Fund (MDLF) personnel. During my sabbatical year of 2012–13, while working on what would become my book on journalism and Islam (Steele 2018), I spent even

more time at *Malaysiakini*. I have also been given access to editorial emails, which has allowed me to follow in real time the coverage of sensitive issues as they unfold. If you add up all of the summer and winter breaks and stints in Malaysia during two years of sabbatical leave, I have been observing and writing about *Malaysiakini* for more than 15 years.

Much of the academic work on Malaysia focuses on politics and elections. Each general election leads to a spate of new work, as scholars and analysts read the tea leaves and try to figure out the direction the country will take and why. In 1999, the question was would *Reformasi* have permanent effects? After 2004, the question was why the rout for the Islamist party PAS? The internet was the story in 2008, along with Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's acknowledgment that his party had failed to use it effectively—a failure so big that it led to the opposition's win of enough seats in Parliament to deny Barisan Nasional (BN) its traditional two-thirds majority. In 2013, it was the opposition's bitter disappointment at Anwar's having won the popular vote, but nevertheless losing the election because of gerrymandering and malapportionment. In 2018 it was the astonishing defeat of BN. The problem with these studies is not that they are inaccurate, but rather that they provide a picture of the moment that fails to recognize the underlying social problems that remain the same.

This study takes a different approach. It looks at the history of modern Malaysia through the lens of *Malaysiakini*. By focusing on significant moments in *Malaysiakini*'s history, it illustrates how seemingly intractable problems get worked out within Malaysia's only truly independent newsroom. Just as Herbert Gans focused on how four exemplary American news organizations covered divisions such as race, class, sex, age and ideology, this book examines how *Malaysiakini* reports on similar fissures in Malaysian society. How do “sensitivities” about race, religion, politics and citizenship that are embedded in daily life get worked out within the institution of *Malaysiakini*?

When Steven Gan made his remarks at the anniversary dinner, he titled them “20 years of change—from Mahathir to Mahathir.”³ *Malaysiakini* was founded in 1999. It was one of many online portals that sprung up in the wake of *Reformasi*, a movement sparked by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's 1998 firing of his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim. At the time, there was no reason to think that *Malaysiakini* would be different from any of the other blogs and portals that covered the trial of the charismatic former deputy PM—in fact, international

³ “20 years of change—from Mahathir to Mahathir,” *Malaysiakini*, Nov. 23, 2019. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/501001>

observers usually focused on blogs run by journalists and politicians who were far more famous. Yet this was a mistake, as *Malaysiakini* wanted to do something much more important than report on *Reformasi*: its founders intended to bring independent journalism to Malaysia in hopes of changing the country.

Under Malaysia's system of "electoral authoritarianism" (Case 2011), news organizations generally operate in the interests of political actors (Abbott 2011; Sani 2005; Brown 2005). In Malaysia, all publications are licensed and journalists must work under the restrictions of the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act, the Sedition Act and the Official Secrets Act. Yet at the same time, there is an unlikely loophole for online news organizations and bloggers (Gan 2007). In a 1997 speech in California, where he was courting overseas investment for high-tech industries, Mahathir had pledged a no-censorship policy for the internet (Uimonen 2002). Although online journalists are subject to harsh defamation laws regulating content, they need not fear losing a license to publish, because they are not officially recognized as journalists (Tong 2004).

Malaysiakini was launched at a time when mainstream media had lost credibility for their pro-government slant (Chin 2003), and it soon gained attention and international accolades for its independent reporting (Nain 2002; Wong 2001). As Anwar Ibrahim said in a 2007 interview, "*Malaysiakini* has independence, credibility. It's the only avenue we have; the other media have an instruction to block us out."⁴

Although *Malaysiakini*'s English-language reports are behind a paywall, the news portal continues to rank number one among Malaysian news sites, despite having spawned a number of online imitators.⁵ In recent years it has reported extensively not only on the opposition, but also on such issues as the billion-dollar 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) investment fund scandal, which suggests a mind-boggling level of political corruption linked to former prime minister Najib Razak. Although *The Wall Street Journal* earned recognition as a Pulitzer Prize finalist for reporting that hundreds of millions of dollars from the government-backed fund were deposited in the prime minister's accounts to secure victory in the 2013 general election, these developments received little coverage in Malaysia other than in online media.⁶ Instead, the

⁴ Interview with Anwar Ibrahim, Mar. 27, 2007.

⁵ As of March 2022, *Malaysiakini* was the number one news website in Malaysia. <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/malaysia/>

⁶ *The Malaysian Insider*, which did report on the scandal, was shut down "for commercial reasons" in March 2016, a few weeks after it was blocked by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission as part of a crackdown on critical coverage. In July 2015,

politically connected mainstream media published only the government's denials—along with its threats to sue or shut down its critics.

Elsewhere I have argued that *Malaysiakini* uses the ideology of journalistic professionalism not only to challenge the status quo, but also to create a “pocket” of resistance to authoritarianism in Malaysia (Steele 2009). I argued that it is the norms and values of independent journalism rather than the technology of the internet per se that make *Malaysiakini* so threatening to government authorities. As Kalathil and Boas have pointed out, the internet is only a set of connections between computers and “can have no impact apart from its use by human beings” (2003: 2). Since its founding, *Malaysiakini* has used the norms of good journalism to legitimize alternative views of events. In other words, by utilizing what Tuchman (1972) called “the strategic ritual of objectivity,” *Malaysiakini* has generally been able to defend itself against attack. And by creating a space where citizens are free to express their opinions, *Malaysiakini* deliberately promotes a blueprint for democratic civic discourse in Malaysia.

Although *Malaysiakini* was new in 1999, it was actually the product of many years of preparation and planning, which I focus on in Chapters 1 and 2. Linked to a loose coalition of young Malaysian activists who had come of age in the 1980s and early 1990s, Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran drew upon a progressive worldview they had honed as students at the University of New South Wales. Their group, which included activists such as Tian Chua and Elizabeth Wong, both of whom would become well-known political figures in Malaysia, had long been interested in the role of media in organizing to bring about social change. With the surge in democratic activism that followed the arrest and trial of Anwar Ibrahim, they believed that the time was right to launch a publication that could do these things.

Malaysiakini was established to promote social justice, freedom of expression and democracy.⁷ Both Steven and Prem say that *Malaysiakini*'s founding was not directly linked to *Reformasi*, yet the news portal's trajectory has at many times crisscrossed with that of Anwar Ibrahim. Although Anwar became well known as a Muslim student activist first at the University of Malaya in the 1970s, and then as the firebrand head of ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia or the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia), it was his affiliation with Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the 1980s that made him internationally famous (Liow 2011:

The Edge received a three-month suspension for its coverage of 1MDB, which was deemed a threat to public order and national security.

⁷ <https://about.malaysiakini.com/faq/i-find-that-there-are-other-sites-like-malaysiakini-whats-the-difference/>



Figure 1: Tian Chua, 1998. Photo credit: Chua Kok Hwa, *The Star*, Malaysia.

670). Anwar rose to power and fame first as education minister, then as deputy prime minister. It was his unceremonious firing in 1998 and subsequent trials for corruption and sodomy that launched a movement and inspired the “*Reformasi* generation” that I describe in Chapter 3. Although many Malaysians of all races mistrusted Anwar, it was clear that he had been treated unjustly.

Once Anwar had been convicted, it was his wife Wan Azizah who became the titular head of the political party he had begun: Parti Keadilan Nasional, or the National Justice Party. Although the mainstream media did not cover Keadilan, which in 1999 merged with Parti Rakyat Malaysia (the Malaysian People’s Party) to become the People’s Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat or PKR), the new online portal *Malaysiakini* did. Tian Chua—Steven and Prem’s comrade from university days, whose photo facing down a police water cannon truck in 1998 became one of the iconic images of *Reformasi*—was the new party’s information chief.⁸ When Tian was later arrested along with ten other activists under the Internal Security Act (ISA) and sentenced to two years

⁸ See “Revisiting Reformasi 20 years later,” *The Star*, Sept. 9, 2018. <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/one-mans-meat/2018/09/29/revisiting-reformasi-20-years-later-to-many-tian-chua-was-the-face-of-a-historic-mass-movement-it-to>

detention, it was *Malaysiakini* that followed his story, publishing 634 articles about him during its first three years.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the internal functioning of *Malaysiakini*—how it differs from other Malaysian news organizations, and how it operationalizes “independence.” In Malaysia, where most media are funded either by political parties or by individuals who are close to power, *Malaysiakini* has forged its own way. One of the first news organizations anywhere to erect a pay wall, in 2002 *Malaysiakini* began to charge for access to the English and Chinese sections of the website; the Bahasa Malaysia section remained free. Also in 2002, MDLF acquired a 29 percent stake in Mkini Dotcom, *Malaysiakini*’s parent company. As their website says, “the investment was MDLF’s first in a digital native online media organization and provided funding for *Malaysiakini* to diversify its sources of revenue.”⁹

In Malaysia, conspiracy theories abound, and *Malaysiakini* has been the object of many of them. Accused of receiving funds from “international donors,” the most persistent of the rumors links *Malaysiakini* to George Soros, the financier whom Mahathir singled out as the villain behind the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Beginning with a story in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (*FEER*) in 2001, the rumor created a crisis for the fledgling site. As *The Wall Street Journal* (which, like *FEER*, is owned by Dow Jones) reported:

Last week, *Malaysiakini* ran into new political obstacles. After a magazine reported the start-up had received funding from hedge-fund guru George Soros—a despised man in many parts of Southeast Asia—Deputy Home Affairs Minister Chor Chee Heung urged that *Malaysiakini* reporters be barred from covering government events. The threat is a serious one for an electronic-newspaper that lives on political coverage.¹⁰

The rumors, attacks and raids became commonplace. As Steven Gan wrote in a 2020 anniversary editorial, “we were declared ‘traitors’ by one prime minister and sued by another. We faced debilitating cyber-attacks, were kicked out of press conferences time and again, saw a number of our journalists arrested and our office raided by the police at least five times.”¹¹

⁹ <https://www.mdif.org/timeline-malaysiakinis-15-years-of-innovation/> In 2013, MDLF changed its name to MDIF, the Media Development Investment Fund.

¹⁰ “Malaysian political news site struggles to reach profitability,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 15, 2001. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB98218418123770386>

¹¹ “As Malaysiakini turns 21, join us in our celebration,” *Malaysiakini*, Nov. 20, 2020. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/551739>

Chapters 7–9 focus on the stubborn problems of race, religion and politics, and examine how *Malaysiakini* has struggled to present these issues fairly. Chapter 10 focuses on *Malaysiakini*'s “citizen journalism” program. The citizen journalists’ reporting on the destruction of the traditional village Kampung Buah Pala in Penang—which contradicted that of *Malaysiakini*'s video team—left two of the news portal’s main constituencies in conflict and raised questions about the professionalism of one of the organization’s long-time reporters.

In May 2018, almost 20 years after the firing of Anwar, a coalition calling itself Pakatan Harapan (the Alliance of Hope) consisting of PKR, the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the progressive Islamic party Amanah (National Trust Party), defeated BN in a stunning win of the 14th General Election. Brought down by the corruption scandal of 1MDB, for the first time in the history of Malaysia, UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) was no longer in power (Welsh 2018). The winning coalition included former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, who, at 92, with his hastily assembled and largely Malay organization Bersatu, became the world’s first nonagenarian prime minister and the world’s oldest elected leader. Although Anwar Ibrahim’s wife Wan Azizah was the deputy prime minister, the assumption was once again that Anwar was the prime minister in waiting.

While much of the world focused on the age of the new Malaysian prime minister, for Malaysians this was the least interesting thing about him. Would the struggles of those who had fought for free and fair elections be rewarded? Would colonial era laws that had long shackled the press finally be repealed? Would Pakatan Harapan bring about not only a different kind of society in which race and religion were not the keys to identity, but also an end to race-based politics? Its manifesto seemed to suggest that it would.

Just two years after *Malaysiakini*'s 20th-anniversary dinner, Malaysia looked very different. The Pakatan Harapan coalition had fallen apart and, once again, the political parties had reconfigured themselves, largely along lines of race and religion (Chin 2020). A splintering of Pakatan Harapan’s founding partner PKR led to the collapse of the entire coalition, the resignation of Mahathir and the appointment of Muhyiddin Yassin as the prime minister. Muhyiddin, an erstwhile member of Bersatu, had previously left UMNO to join the party. His takeover of the government on March 1, 2020, coincided with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which he and his party used as an excuse to suspend Parliament and rule by decree. The Alliance of Hope was ended. Very few of the reform measures mandated by the election had been enacted, including the repeal of laws regulating the press.



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Malaysiakini was founded in 1999 by Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran, two young Malaysians who met as overseas students in Australia. One of the many online portals that sprung up in the wake of *Reformasi*, a movement sparked by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad's 1998 firing of his deputy Anwar Ibrahim, there was no reason to think that *Malaysiakini* would be different from the other blogs and portals that covered the trial of the charismatic former deputy PM. Yet this would be a mistake, as *Malaysiakini* wanted to do something much more important than report on *Reformasi*: its founders intended to bring independent journalism to Malaysia in hopes of changing the country.

Based on more than 15 years of observation of newsroom practices, this book is an intimate portrait of the people and issues behind Malaysia's only truly independent media outlet. The author illustrates *Malaysiakini's* particular mix of idealism in action, with attention to how "sensitive" issues such as race, religion, politics, and citizenship get worked out in practice in the newsroom. This attention to the inner workings of one of the most important media institutions in the region yields not only a deep newsroom ethnography, but a nuanced, rich history of modern Malaysia.

"Everyone who cares about independent journalism can and should learn from *Malaysiakini's* example. There is no better place to start than reading Janet Steele's book, based on unprecedented access and 15 years of research documenting how the team behind the site leveraged the internet to create a space for democratic civic discourse in an often difficult environment—a challenge journalists face all over the world."

– **Rasmus Kleis Nielsen**, *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*

"Media historian Janet Steele's intimate portrait shows how *Malaysiakini's* independent, progressive journalism not just chronicled momentous events in Malaysia, but also made history as part of the country's democracy movement."

– **Cherian George**, author, *Media and Power in Southeast Asia*

Janet Steele is Professor of Media and Public Affairs and International Affairs at the George Washington University.

