

Global Media Journal, Indian Edition

Volume 11, Issue 2, December 2019

Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal

***Malaysiakini* – An Asian Online News Template of Virtuous Journalism**

Carmen Lai Jia Weng and Krishnamoorthy Muthaly

***Malaysiakini* – An Asian Online News Template of Virtuous Journalism**

Carmen Lai Jia Weng and Krishnamoorthy Muthaly

Abstract

Malaysia is an emerging Southeast Asian country of over 32 million people who are inclined towards an authoritarian society, despite declaring to be a democratic nation. Nevertheless, there are signs of democracy being practiced after a 62-year old one-party government by Barisan National (BN) or United Front was defeated in elections in 2018. In the past, the government controlled the media through 35 regressive printing and publication regulations. The aggregate impact of digital media and online news, however, has played a significant role in shaping the newly expanded political landscape in Malaysia. *Malaysiakini* (*Malaysia Now*), an independent media played a significant role in Malaysia's 14th General Election (GE14) held on May 9, 2018. With the change in government, May 9 marked a new chapter of its two-decades presence in Malaysia. Moreover, the online news through its socially influential portal changed the whole facade of independent newsgathering and dissemination through its *holding the power to account and to tell truth to power*. Within the context of *Malaysiakini*, this paper explores alternative journalism and seeks to find out whether *Malaysiakini* practices virtuous norms of journalism under the Buddhist principles analysed from the Kalama Sutta. The article employs findings based solely on interviews, commentaries and news articles, and concludes with the democratic potential of *Malaysiakini*, given the evolving media landscape in Malaysia.

In the 21st century society, the Internet connects individuals in the global village while information communication technologies expand access spaces and new possibilities for citizen involvement in local and national government spheres (Bryan et al., 1998). While the Internet can help to enhance and redefine political struggle in contemporary society, it is worth to remember that social, cultural and political liberty that is part of democracy is precious and paramount. Wangchuk (2015) states that without a dynamic mass media, no nation has really constructed a powerful democracy. Along these lines, journalism is truly necessary as it is essentially "truth-telling that aims at the government interest and the public good" (Jacquette, 2010, p. 218). By adding to open dialogue, mass media assumes a crucial role in shaping public opinion. Whenever citizens are limited in their choice of quality news and free media to present diverse viewpoints, democracy erodes. Observing media freedom, therefore, is a precondition for a truly democratic system (Doronila, 2000).

Malaysia is an emerging Southeast Asian country with over 32 million individuals who, in spite of declaring themselves a democratic country are slanted towards an authoritarian culture. Political parties related to the last government, Barisan National (BN) or United Front owns most of the mainstream media in Malaysia, for as long as 62 years. Through 35 regressive printing and publishing regulations, the government controlled the mass media, limiting what they could say and cover and continuing their pro-government bias in news

coverage and advertising (Weiss, 2006). Until recently, in Malaysia's limited democracy, the public sphere has been partisan and characterised by strong governing party interference (Netto, 2002). Therefore, in searching for alternative news sources, readers in Malaysia progressively look to the Internet's news portals and social media.

Approximately, one-third of Malaysia's internet activity involves visits to online news sites (Liow & Pasuni, 2010). Internet news media are interactive, global in dispersion and inexpensive to produce. As Malaysians battle with contentious and complex ideas, it calls for alternative media with "independent journalism" (Schudson, 2003) to enter the field with an idealistic appeal of objective, balanced and truthful reporting. Subsequently, the converging of alternative media through the Internet is a natural one. Driven by a purpose or mandate other than being profit-oriented, alternative media often organised to promote a variety of feedback through its' comments section. They also provide methods of seeing and understanding events that are not accessible out there (Skinner, 2014).

According to Atton (2002), alternative media incorporate marginalised voices normally excluded from mainstream media, either by featuring them in news coverage as central actors or by producing content relevant to their everyday lives. Committed to providing representations of issues, and to advocate social and political reform, alternative media oppose those offered in the mainstream media (Haas, 2004). They express care for the needs of citizens where dissatisfaction with established media has found expression in the celebration of completely different forms, free from established systems (McQuail, 2000). Nonetheless, Fuchs (2010) found that alternative media research is still short in empirical studies and in theories while generally neglected in communication and journalism studies.

Most prominent among these online news sites was (and still is) a non-partisan, professionally produced, *Malaysiakini* (*Malaysia Now*). Editor-in-Chief Steven Gan and CEO Premesh Chandran, both veteran reporters, pioneered and launched the country's first online news, *Malaysiakini* in November 1999, with initial financing from the South-East Asian Press Alliance (Seapa) and the New York-based Media Development Loan Fund (George, 2002). Intricately, the country's "reformasi movement" in the 1990s and Malaysians searching for more reliable data sources prompted the emergence of this Internet news portal (Rodan, 2005). *Malaysiakini* also capitalised on the absence of any (yet) legal requirement to license online publications, and the declared engagement by the government not to censor the web (Rodan, 2005).

For two decades, this online news through its socially influential portal changed the whole facade of independent news reporting, gathering, and dissemination through its *holding the power to account and to tell truth to power* in Malaysia. George (2006) argues that *Malaysiakini* promotes professional factual reporting, outside of government control and a non-partisan aggregate character among its readers who are progressive Malaysians contending with similar priorities. "Journalism should be non-partisan," co-founder, and editor-in-chief Steven Gan explains, "but that does not mean that we are not apolitical. *Malaysiakini* feels strongly on certain issues such as press freedom, independent of the judiciary, good governance, human rights, and environment" (Malek, 2019, 10:38). As such,

those issues would define how *Malaysiakini* would cover them and how much coverage is given.

Using a “strategic ritual of objectivity” (Tuchman, 1972, p. 661), *Malaysiakini*’s journalistic reporting includes the presentation of conflicting possibilities and the strategic use of supporting evidence and quotations. Moreover, Steele (2009) writes that *Malaysiakini* practices the ideology of “good journalism” to legitimise alternative views of events, thus challenging the authoritarianism of the last government, BN. Also, *Malaysiakini* journalistic values promote high accuracy, independence, and balance. The online news organisation exhibits democratic leadership in its ethnically diverse environment where everyone contributes to the decision-making process, no matter how small or insignificant. Steele (2009) concludes that *Malaysiakini* promotes a blueprint for democratic civic discourse in Malaysia.

Within the context of *Malaysiakini*, this paper explores alternative journalism and seeks to find out whether *Malaysiakini* applies virtuous norms of journalism under the Buddhist principles analysed from Kalama Sutta of the Anguttara Nikaya, Sutta no. 65. The article concludes with the democratic potential of *Malaysiakini*, given the evolving media landscape in Malaysia.

Alternative Media and Theoretical Framework

According to Nerone (2009), journalism is a system of beliefs that define suitable news experts, news media, news systems, and procedures. A multitude of commonly accepted norms and values such as truthfulness, accountability, transparency (Singer, 2007), a commitment to public service as well as independence and objectivity (Deuze, 2011) characterise journalism. If these norms are missing, then the journalistic conducts become corrupt.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, “hegemonic journalism” (Nerone, 2012) emerged in the West that had a truly global presence, later exported to the developing world, together with many other Western convictions and procedures. All societies have some kind of news scheme as a mechanism for tracking change and deviance culturally. To challenge it, some sites and movements created counter-hegemonic models. The Internet provides the resources and conditions for free and independent media to facilitate organising strategies as new social movements. While effective, financially feasible alternative media could be a counterbalance to the commercialised mainstream media (Seneviratne, 2005).

Small, alternative, independent and underground presses struggled to provide divergent points of view and cultural choices, but their successes were often short-lived (Lievrouw, 2011). Nonetheless, these so-called alternative media are central to experience because they are media that inform, reflect, express people’s experience, on a daily basis – if not more than the mass media, then at least in a significantly different way, because for those involved in their practice, the very process of such projects becomes part of everyday life (Atton, 2002).

Mostly, these online news websites do not just struggle against government domination; they embody competing for normative notions of journalism and its role in democracy, subscribe

to a more morally-engaged and less disinterested mode of journalism than their mainstream counterparts (George, 2006). As Steven Gan, editor-in-chief of Malaysia's first news portal, *Malaysiakini* points out: "While the digital revolution has been disruptive to journalism, journalism – the process of distilling, interpreting and reporting the news – is still relevant today. After all, we need credible sources of news, where information is factual, trustworthy and accurate" (Oorjitham, 2015, p.2).

This paper employs findings based solely on interviews, commentaries and news articles to enrich understanding of *Malaysiakini* model of journalism using selected principles in Kalama Sutta as its theoretical framework. Besides, a Buddhist approach to rethink and reframe media and journalism practices are well-advocated. For instance, Seneviratne (2018) calls for a "human-centric journalism" that can offer to anyone regardless of religious and political affiliation. And Wangchuk (2015) proposes the "Middle-Path Journalism Model" for an Asian framework based on four pillars of community and collectivism, compassion, commitment, and contentment.

Scientifically, Kalama Sutta coined by Buddhist scholars as "Charter of Free Inquiry" (Thera 1994) rejects unfounded faith, sentimentalism, and dogmatism that obstruct clear vision of things as they really are, instead it encourages self-mastery through observation and analytical investigation that applies to assurance of free inquiry, freedom of expression, the autonomy of moral judgment, free will and responsibility (Gnanarama, 2013).

In the Sutta, Buddha calls for communication to be honest, helpful, clear and wholesome, rather than deceptive, coercive, and harmful to ensure human sanity and social harmony (Kapor 1996). Kalama Sutta presents the rules for truth-seeker in a simple formula: *test things in terms of cause and effect. Whatever is unskillful, leading to harm and ill, abandon them; whatever is skillful, leading to happiness and peace, practice them. Apply the test of skillfulness in all one's actions* (Rosenberg, 2013). Ethically and morally, the Sutta offers an exposition for dialogue and an investigation into the reality that could assist reflect on the discourse of contemporary media and journalism.

***Malaysiakini* Model of Virtuous Journalism**

Until *Malaysiakini* came into the picture, Malaysians were only exposed to truly independent journalism through foreign publications and television channels like CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, and international television networks. *Malaysiakini*'s goal was "to create an independent news organisation that would open up the issues of press freedom and human rights, enhance democracy, and shows people why these issues were so important" (Steele, 2009). In the quest for truth, the way *Malaysiakini* operates is in accordance with some of the Buddhist principles outlined in Kalama Sutta.

The Assurance of Free Inquiry

First, Kalama Sutta states that free inquiry is the only valid means of obtaining knowledge while analytical reasoning and free, independent thinking are the only valid means of deciding what is right and wrong with regard to all matters, spiritually or intellectually. To

avoid fallacies, generally, one should not associate truth with any sources of knowledge without further investigation. Rather, one should give it careful attention and full scrutiny (Gnanarama, 2013). “*First try them as gold is tried by fire,*” Buddha says (Dhammananda, 2002, p. 338).

This paper argues that the principles of free inquiry are *Malaysiakini*'s primary practice. Steven Gan is very clear on being absolutely free to investigation on anything that is wrong and generates debate on it. Similarly, crucial to the promotion of the public sphere, Habermas (1984) argues that the best way to exercise power is for the people to take decisions appealing to the forces of better arguments where rational dialogue [should be] the sole arbiter of any issue.

On May 9, 2018, Malaysia saw a brand new world. "People Power" (Muthaly, 2018) removed the old BN regime with the multi-ethnic and multi-party coalition government, Hope Alliance, Pakatan Harapan (PH), earlier the opposition party. *Malaysiakini*'s dedicated live coverage of the historic government change since Malaysia's independence in 1957, subsequently, bagged them the excellence in reporting from the Society of Publishers in Asia, was reported in the article “*Malaysiakini's wins Sopa breaking news award*” (Malaysiakini, 2019).

On the night of May 9, over 10 million Internet users followed *Malaysiakini*'s minute-by-minute election reporting. Another 7.2 million reportedly tuned into KiniTV for Malaysia's 14th General Election (GE14) results, while many more received their news through the social media accounts of *Malaysiakini* and indirectly through their WhatsApp organisations. The country glued to the online news as the vote count advanced through the night. Just as the Buddha was always in quest of the truth, Malaysians too wanted to know the truth. However, at around 9.30 pm, when most of the counting done, there was a significant lull in election outcomes. Drawing data from various sources, *Malaysiakini* was the first media to call the election for PH at 2.28 am. A few moments later, other media followed suit. In the article, “*Millions tuned into Malaysiakini, KiniTV for GE14 result*” (Malaysiakini, 2018), *Malaysiakini* CEO Premesh Chandran said, “although we heard many rumours that Pakatan Harapan had won, we wanted to be absolutely sure.” Kirkhorn (1990) describes the practice of attention leaves journalists knowledgeable and increases their immunity to deception and illusion.

Malaysiakini played a pivotal role in reporting the drama of change of government in Malaysia's 14th General Election (GE14) held on 9 May 2018. Despite the fact that its live polling day report as well as a special live election results page live.undi.info were briefly blocked on the night of May 9 by the Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC). In the article “*MCMC ordered at least 11 ISPs to block Mkini GE14 sites*” (Malaysiakini, 2018), the regulatory body stated that it had ordered *Malaysiakini*'s live updates of voting night outcomes blocked out of fear that “it might impact domestic stability, government order and harmony, and economic stability”.

In “*Millions tuned into Malaysiakini, KiniTV for GE14 results*” (Malaysiakini, 2018), Steven Gan optimistically commented that the *Malaysiakini* team worked seamlessly together on the ground as well as those in headquarters to deliver the recent count updates across the nation.

"All involved, including volunteers who went to the office to assist feed the outcomes into our scheme, have done great teamwork," he said. "We are going to write a fresh chapter now. There is no change in how we do our work as reporters – we shall hold power to account and tell truth to power."

The Freedom of Expression

Second, the Sutta clearly regards freedom of expression as an important aspect of personal liberty and a civil right of every human being living on this earth. Of course, the freedom to communicate should limit within the rules of law. Unfortunately, in some countries, very often the implementation of extermination methods denies freedom of speech (Gnanarama, 2013). Malaysia is a democracy, nominally. While Article 10 of the Federal Constitution enshrines freedom of speech, about 35 repressive media laws including the Anti-Fake News Act (2018), the Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984), and the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998) have threatened and (still) undermine this basic constitutional right.

To institutionalise press freedom, Steven Gan reiterates that the country's media laws need to be repealed or modified in the interest of all Malaysians so that journalists can continue to do their job without fear or favour (Reduan, 2018). In addition, Gan (2019, pp. 5-6) argues: "We must defend journalism. We must ensure that the role of journalists - in recording events, in presenting facts, in building opinions – is here to stay. We need journalism in whatever form because, at the ballot box, democracy means that voters make an informed choice. And this can only happen if there are credible news sources where information is factual, reliable, and accurate."

In the post-truth media landscape of Malaysia, *Malaysiakini* together with Malaysian journalists is negotiating with the authorities to create an *autonomous media council* to self-regulate the news media industry and to end the government de facto control of the press. Interestingly, the idea conceived as far as in the 1970s has yet to have conclusive decisions due to opposing views about forming such a press council. Indeed, press freedom is far from ideal for Malaysia, but the landscape is evolving. According to the World Press Freedom Index, Malaysia moved to 123rd among 180 countries in 2019, compared to 145th in 2018. And, Gan is hopeful. "Malaysians are experiencing the freedom of speech that they haven't had before, and rolling it back will be difficult for any government," Gan claims (Quackenbush et. al., 2018, p. 9). Similarly, Steele (2009) finds that the *Malaysiakini* news model involves freedom of expression, civil liberties, and human rights with a remarkable sense of shared news judgement.

The Autonomy of Moral Judgement

Third, an important principle on the autonomy of moral judgement in the Kalama Sutta deals with moral evaluation as a defence towards intellectual dependency and one's *raison d'etre*. A person may judge the validity of a given proposition based on one's conscience of right and wrong, for the betterment of the individual and society as a whole (Gnanarama, 2013).

In comparison, *Malaysiakini*'s content is in sync with the autonomy of moral judgement. As the *Malaysiakini*'s webpage concedes: *Editorial independence is the fruit of financial*

independence. By paying for content, newsreaders help maintain the focus on quality news. It is a small investment towards an informed society, as well as an accountable government. Find out more about our finances and how you can contribute. We have also benefitted from donors who share our vision of a free press.

In line with the Sutta, as *Malaysiakini* practices autonomy of moral judgement, it writes without any fear or favour. So much so that the online news portal becomes the fertile ground for harassments and legal suits. A major one came from the last authoritarian government defamation suit over *Malaysiakini* readers' post in the "Yoursay" column published on the website on 14 May 2014. As a matter of principle, *Malaysiakini* gives enough space for any wronged party to respond to any critical pieces or readers' comments – a practice that is common in any healthy democracy. Subsequently, the government dropped the suit. In the article "*Najib, Umno drop suit against Malaysiakini*" (The Sun, 2018), Gan asserted, "We've been fighting this case for four years. It's good that this has finally come to an end so that we can go back to focusing on doing what we do best, which is delivering news and views that matter to Malaysians."

Contrary, in April 2018, *Malaysiakini* filed a judicial review application to challenge the constitutionality of the Anti-Fake News Act 2018. Taking a step further to defend freedom of expression, the news portal is the first to file the challenge against the controversial law, which had been highly criticised by federal lawmakers and also human rights groups. Gan is of the opinion that the Act violates the rights to liberty under Article 5 of the Federal Constitution and the rights to freedom of speech under Article 10. Moreover, *Malaysiakini* claims that as the Act affects its very business of being a news portal, it has the legitimate standing to make the challenge (Yatim, 2018). From a virtue point-of-view, an occupation's purpose provides it with moral justification, whenever it may be conceived into a broader conception of what is good for humans (Borden, 2007) And alongside with it brings moral judgements (Houston, 2010). Incidentally, the bill to abolish the Anti-Fake News Act was passed on 9 October 2019 by the Malaysian Government¹.

Free Will and Responsibility

Under the free will and responsibility principle, Kalama Sutta specifies that while transcendental reality is beyond causality or conditionality, the phenomenal world is causally conditioned, and the individual has the power of exercising his free will and the responsibility in selecting and following a moral behaviour, amicable to transcending the causal nexus that keeps him in servitude. The criteria for deciding what is good and wholesome are the freedom from greed, freedom from hatred and freedom from confusion. Instrumentally, when these three evil roots are absent, only then virtues such as objectivity, compassion, and wisdom can thrive (Gnanarama, 2013).

The principle of free will and responsibility is linked to what Steven and Premesh set out to do in the formative years (1999 – 2000) of *Malaysiakini*. Two months following the removal

¹ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-parliament-passes-law-to-scrap-anti-fake-news-law-again-abolishing-it-end-of>

and arrest of deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim in November 1998, the mainstream media were reporting only government-sanctioned views of the leadership squabble that grasped Malaysia. In the article “*The Malaysiakini Story...How We Began*” (Malaysiakini, 2009), “the need for independent news was clear. At one of those late-night supper discussions at a Mamak restaurant in Petaling Jaya, there were suggestions to set up an underground newspaper,” co-founder and CEO, Premesh Chandran said. “However, a more sustainable alternative was mooted – a news website.”

The sutta deals with a doctrine of emancipation from the vicious circle of causal conditionality dominating the phenomenal world. Comparatively, *Malaysiakini*'s calling was when Malaysia was going through a phase getting out of the vicious circle of an unjust, unfair and autocratic government. As they decided to set up *Malaysiakini*, Gan and Premesh demonstrated free will and responsibility as both are firm believers of media freedom. Under this, the Kalama Sutta states: *Man is entrusted with the responsibility of choosing what is wholesome from alternative courses of action. As the freedom to will and the responsibility for subsequent actions rest upon the individual himself, he is, therefore, the moulder of his own fate* (Gnanarama, 2013, p.28).

Righteousness prevails here as it is one of the main foundations of Buddhism. Even today, *Malaysiakini* maintains hand-to-mouth existence and runs a tight rein on expenses. Everyone in *Malaysiakini* gets lower than what the market pays, but it is a sacrifice they are willing to take. Routinely having to face arrests and other attacks, the professional media team in *Malaysiakini* dutifully embark on their mission to promote social justice, freedom of expression and democracy where they try to be the most balanced and accurate. For they too believe in free will and moral responsibility.

Post GE14, *Malaysiakini* doubled its income as advertisers who once shunned the online news portal began to make a beeline to *Malaysiakini* and saw no more issues working with them. *Malaysiakini* was (and still is) a subscription model, which it successfully introduced in 2002. However, the online publication is expanding its source of revenues through events, sponsorships and advertising campaigns (Gan, S. personal interview, August 3, 2019).

With the increase in commercialisation interest with *Malaysiakini*, Steven Gan reaffirms that the way it operates and reports news would remain unchanged. “Since the day it started, *Malaysiakini*'s news model has always been to report on news and views that matter,” the Editor-in-Chief says. “The editorial and content are separate from business unit headed by Premesh Chandran.”

Although the recent government change may seem favourable towards *Malaysiakini*, Steven Gan insists that *Malaysiakini* independence remains, as they would apply the same critical standards to the opposition parties as well as to the ruling coalition. Gan emphasises that “it's not in our DNA to try to parrot the government and be the government's PR agency” (Lourdes, 2018, p.8).

Such a balance of strong journalism and strong business ultimately contributes to the success of *Malaysiakini* today. And the philosophy of *Malaysiakini*'s practicing virtuous norms in their news reporting continues to make changes in Malaysian society.

***Malaysiakini* Moving Forward**

Come November 2019, *Malaysiakini* celebrates its 20th anniversary. With the key purpose of ensuring *Malaysiakini*'s economic and editorial independence in perpetuity, Steven Gan identifies the need to establish a trust foundation. Accordingly, the trust would liberate *Malaysiakini* from commercial and political interference, at the same time reinvesting any profits into *Malaysiakini*'s independent journalism and journalistic projects. Again, Gan stresses, "independent media needs independent financing" (Gan, S. personal interview, August 3, 2019).

As the online publication grows, Steven Gan admits the challenge is to ensure that *Malaysiakini* is able to retain its unique work culture - independent, non-hierarchical, and emphasis on teamwork (Gan, S. personal communication, August 22, 2019). Gan's leadership and approach to work best captured by an ancient Chinese philosopher: *A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves* - Lao Tzu (6th century B.C.E.).

On the other hand, the pragmatic and innovative *Malaysiakini*'s founders point out that data journalism could be a way forward to better use of data with technological advancements. After all, *Malaysiakini* has been investing in technology since 2001. Using data journalism, journalists can explore and use data sets, ranging from the use of infographics to the analysis and investigation of raw data sources (Knight, 2015). Considered a form of investigative journalism, it uncovers stories otherwise outside the public domain (Stephen et. al., 2017) and creates newsgathering techniques that can democratise information flow (Rogers, 2011).

In addition, Internet access is growing in Malaysia. Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reported in 2018, there are 28.7 million Internet users compared to 24.5 million in 2016. But the way Steven Gan sees it, social media polarises society in Malaysia and elsewhere, and as such acting as echo chambers that disallow mass communication. "Which is why the media must continue to play its role – we need to provide everyone a clear picture of what Malaysians are talking and thinking – the good and the bad," Gan explains (Gan, S. personal interview, August 3, 2019).

Further, Steven Gan argues that "Malaysia is a divisive society." Realistically, "to bring change in a divided society, we need to build consensus. Consensus building requires us to talk to one another. Indeed, we will not be able to get all these disparate groups to talk to one another if they don't know what others are saying or thinking. And that's what social media is doing – keeping everyone in their own silos. We need to help break these silos. And for a divided society like Malaysia, it is a long and difficult process. And *Malaysiakini* must play a role in this process," Gan argues (Gan, S. personal communication, August 22, 2019).

Ultimately, *Malaysiakini* believes in an inclusive Malaysia. "Healing division is the main role now for *Malaysiakini*," Gan explains, "it is our responsibility to report and give voice to the

voiceless for them to say from all sides in order to find common ground to build consensus.” After all, “democracy is better served with more journalism, not less,” Gan adds. (Gan, S. personal interview, August 3, 2019). As Pickard (2011) outlines, journalism functions as democracy’s critical infrastructure as it serves as a watchdog over the powerful, covers crucial social issues and provides a forum for diverse voices and viewpoints.

The experience of *Malaysiakini* is truly an inspiring one. After all, Malaysia’s top online news portal has tested its ideas in the laboratory of their actions and through the visionary and courageous leaderships of *Malaysiakini*’s CEO Premesh Chandran and Editor-in-Chief Steven Gan, along with their dedicated teams of editors, journalists, and loyal civil society have overcome many challenges and grow from them. Despite all these, *Malaysiakini* is still stretching on its own lived experience. “*Let the Truth be your lamp and your refuge,*” Buddha says (Dhammananda, 2002, p. 68).

Conclusion

This paper concludes that *Malaysiakini* practices virtuous norms of journalism, in accordance with the Buddhist principles outlined in Kalama Sutta, with the emphasis on assurance of free inquiry, freedom of expression, the autonomy of moral judgment, as well as free will and responsibility. With *Malaysiakini*, Premesh Chandran and Steven Gan have put their ideas of the truth to the test. And now the online news portal virtuous journalism lights the way.

Accordingly, Premesh notes that there are plenty of scholarly discussions happening, not only about how Malaysia’s media should take shape in the future but also how Asian social media landscape should evolve. Therefore, there is a possibility to position Malaysia as a kind of a scholarly centre and media centre for Asia. And perhaps *Malaysiakini* has a role in that space (Lourdes, 2018).

Meanwhile, Gan (2019, pp. 6-7) in his keynote speech at the 51st Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) annual dinner on 18 May, contends that “journalism makes a difference – it can help bring change, it can help improve lives, it can help empower people.” Offering insight into his aspiration in order to encourage others in media and news reporting, Gan quotes from Keith Kent poem (1968):

*People are illogical, unreasonable and self-centred,
Love them anyway.
The good that you do today will be forgotten tomorrow,
Do good anyway.
What you spent years to build may be destroyed overnight,
Build anyway.
Give the world your best, and they will kick you in the teeth,
Give the world your best anyway.*

Arguably, in the challenging new realities where the mass media no longer has the monopoly on news and information, Premesh and Steven would need all their steadfastness and wisdom

to stay the course more than ever in order to take *Malaysiakini* to the next level, which could well be the most demanding yet.

This paper has offered some initial analysis of virtuous norms applied to the profession in journalism. And so, it calls for future studies to articulate and diffuse this normative framework using Buddhist and ancient Asian literature that offer valuable philosophical insights, as discussed in this paper - to craft a media environment where freedom and humanistic values co-exist. Also, further research into the potential of data journalism as well as to investigate what happens when *Malaysiakini* transforms into a mainstream media would be useful.

References

- Atton, C. (2002) *Alternative Media*. London: Sage.
- Bryan, C., Tsagarousianou, R. & Tambini, D. (1998). *Electronic Democracy and The Civic Networking Movement in Context*, in R. Tsagarousianou, D. Tambini and C. Bryan (eds.) *Cyberdemocracy: Technology, Cities and Civic Networks*. London: Routledge.
- Borden, S. L. (2007). *Journalism as practice: MacIntyre, virtue ethics and the press*. Burlington, USA: Ashgate.
- Deuze M (2011) What is journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered. In: Berkowitz D (ed.) *Cultural Meanings of News*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp. 17–31.
- Dhammananda, K.S. (2002). *What Buddhist Believe* (4th Ed). Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia.
- Doronila, A. (2000). *Press freedom in Asia: An uneven terrain (preface)*. In L. Williams & R. Rich (Eds.), *Losing control: Freedom of the press in Asia*. Australian National University, Canberra: Asia Pacific Press.
- Fuchs, C. (2010). Alternative media as critical media. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 13 (2), 173-192.
- Gan, S. (2019). Is journalism dead? 23 May, *Malaysiakini*. Retrieved from <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/477044>
- George, C. (2002). *Singapore: Media at the Mainstream and the Margins*. In *Media Fortunes, Changing Times: ASEAN States in Transition*, edited by Russell Hiang Khng Heng, 173-200. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- George, C. (2006). *Contentious Journalism and the Internet: Towards Democratic Discourse in Malaysia and Singapore*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Gnanarama, P.T. (2013). *Blueprint of Free Inquiry and Personal Verification*. Taiwan ROC: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation.
- Haas, T. (2004). Alternative media, public journalism and the pursuit of democratisation. *Journalism Studies*, 5 (1), 115-121.
- Habermas, J. (1984). *Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume One: Reason and the Rationalization of Society (Book). Translated by Thomas A. McCarthy. Boston, USA: Beacon Press.
- Houston, B. (2010). The future of investigative journalism. *Daedalus*, 139 (2), 45-56.

- Jacquette, D. (2010). *Journalism ethics as truth-telling in the public interest*. In S. Allan (Ed) *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 213–222.
- Kapor, M. (1996). *Free Speech / Right Speech*. Retrieved from <https://tricycle.org/magazine/free-speech-right-speech/>
- Keith, K.M. (1968). *The Paradoxical Commandments*. In *The Silent Revolution: Dynamic Leadership in the Student Council*. Cambridge, USA: Harvard Student Agencies Inc.
- Kirkhorn, M. (1990). The Virtuous Journalist. *British Journalism Review*, 1 (4), pp. 6–24.
- Knight, M. (2015). Data Journalism in the UK: A Preliminary Analysis of Form and Content. *Journal of Media Practice*, 16 (1), 55–72.
- Lievrouw, L.A. (2011). *Alternative and Activist New Media*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Liow, J.C. & Pasuni, A. (2010). Debating the Conduct and Nature of Malaysian Politics: Communalism and New Media Post-March 2008. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 29 (4), 39-65.
- Lourdes, M. (2018). Malaysiakini spent two decades fighting for Malaysia’s democracy. With the opposition in power for the first time since independence, what comes next? *Splice Malaysia*. Retrieved from <https://www.thesplicenewsroom.com/malaysiakini-whats-next/>
- Malaysiakini (2009), The Malaysiakini Story... or How We Began, 14 Oct, *Malaysiakini*. Retrieved from <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/115021>
- Malaysiakini (2018), MCMC ordered at least 11 ISPs to block Mkini GE14 sites, 19 May, *Malaysiakini*. Retrieved from <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/425819>
- Malaysiakini (2018), Millions tuned into Malaysiakini, KiniTV for GE14 results, 14 May, *Malaysiakini*. Retrieved from <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/424750>
- Malaysiakini (2019), Malaysiakini's GE14 coverage wins Sopa breaking news award, 29 May, *Malaysiakini*. Retrieved from <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/477906>
- Malek, A. (Presenter). (2019). Malaysiakini Banks on Media Council for Media Freedom, Part 2. In Morning Run, *The Breakfast Grille*. Kuala Lumpur, MAL: BFM 89.9. Retrieved from <https://www.bfm.my/podcast/morning-run/the-breakfast-grille/bg-steven-gan-editor-in-chief-co-founder-malaysiakini-part-2>
- McQuail, D. (2000). *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory*. London: SAGE.
- Muthaly, K. (2018). *May 9: People’s Power Saves Malaysia: Mahathir Leads the Way*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: MPH Publishing.
- Nerone, J.C. (2009). *The journalism tradition*. In: Eadie WF (ed.) *21st Century Communication: A Reference Handbook*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, pp. 31–38.
- Nerone, J.C. (2012). The Historical Roots of the Normative Model of Journalism. *Journalism*, 14 (4), 446–458.
- Netto, A. (2002). Media in divided societies: Malaysia. *Media Asia*, 29(3), 179-183.
- Oorjitham, S. (2015), Evolving media landscape, 3 May, *The Star*, Malaysia. Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/05/03/evolving-media-landscape-press-freedom-is-vital-if-malaysia-is-to-become-a-developed-nation-by-2020/>

- Pickard, V. (2011). Can government support the press? Historicizing and internationalizing a policy approach to the journalism crisis. *The Communication Review*, 14, 73–95.
- Quackenbush, C., Meixler, E., Solomon, F., Regan, R., Hincks, J., Barron, L., & Haynes, S. (2018). Press Freedom Is Under Attack Across Southeast Asia. Meet the Journalists Fighting Back, 22 June, *TIME*. Retrieved from <https://time.com/longform/press-freedom-southeast-asia/>
- Reduan, H. (2018). 35 laws need to be altered to widen media freedom in Malaysia. 28 July, *New Straits Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2018/07/395405/35-laws-need-be-altered-widen-media-freedom-msia>.
- Rodan, G. (2005). *Transparency and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Asia: Singapore and Malaysia*. New York: Routledge.
- Rogers, S. (2011). *Facts are Sacred: The Power of Data*. London: Guardian Books.
- Rosenberg, L. (2013). The Right to Ask Questions, Insight, Barrie Centre for Buddhist Studies. Retrieved from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/rosenberg/righttoask.html>
- Schudson, M. (2003). *The Sociology of News*. New York, USA: W.W. Norton.
- Seneviratne, K., (2005). New thinking needed to report the "Globalising" world. *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 16, 55-62.
- Seneviratne, K. (2018). *Mindful Communication for Sustainable Development: Perspectives from Asia*. UK/India: SAGE Publications.
- Skinner (2014). *Alternative media*. In Shade, L.R. *Mediascapes: New Patterns in Canadian Communication* (4th Eds). Toronto, Canada: Nelson Education Ltd.
- Singer, J. B. (2007). Contested Autonomy. *Journalism Studies*, 8(1), 79-95.
- Steele, J. (2009). Professionalism Online: How Malaysiakini Challenges Authoritarianism. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 14 (1), 91-111.
- Stephen, C., Lewis, J., & Callaghan, R. (2017). Data Journalism, Impartiality and Statistical Claims. *Journalism Practice*, 11 (10), 1198-1215.
- The Sun (2018), Najib, Umno drop suit against Malaysiakini, 20 Jun, *The Sun Daily*, Malaysia. Retrieved from <https://www.thesundaily.my/archive/najib-umno-drop-suit-against-malaysiakini-YUARCH557175>
- Thera, S. (1994). *Kalama Sutta: The Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry, translated from the Pali Canon*. The Wheel Publication No. 8. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(January), 660–679.
- Wangchuk, D. (2015). Middle-Path Journalism – A conceptual framework. Retrieved from <http://dorjiwangchuk.blogspot.com/2015/10/middle-path-journalism-conceptual.html>
- Weiss, M. (2006). *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Yatim, H. (2018, 27 Apr). Malaysiakini mounts constitutional challenge against Anti-Fake News Act. *Malaysiakini*. Retrieved from <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/421823>

* Carmen Lai Jia Weng is a Lecturer, Faculty of Arts and Communication, HELP University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: jjaweng.lai@help.edu.my

* Krishnamoorthy Muthaly is Associate Professor, Faculty of Arts and Communication, HELP University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: