LANGUAGE, MASS MEDIA, AND DEMOCRACY: THE DEBATE OVER "*KALIMAH ALLAH*" IN THE MALAYSIAN PRINT AND ONLINE MEDIA[1]

Eva Eichenauer

Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, GERMANY
Email: eva.eichenauer@pik-potsdam.de

ABSTRACT

Through a comparative media analysis, this paper examines the media coverage of the print dailies Utusan Malaysia *and* The Star *as well as the online news site* MalaysiaKini *on the debate over* kalimah Allah *that gained momentum in early 2010, when the High Court allowed Christians in Malaysia to use the term Allah for addressing God in their religious services and publications. A systems theoretical approach is used to study the interrelation of mass media and the political system. Although one might assume that because of the highly controlled print media, Malaysia's realities are challenged only via "online dissent", this study suggests that Malaysia's linguistically plural public sphere offers multiple re-presentations of reality even within the highly restricted context print publications operate in. It also shows that the print media landscape not only reflects and reproduces the ethnic-based division of Malaysia's political system, but is a key player in actively creating the ethnic division of Malaysian society that is crucial for the ruling coalition to stay in power. Hence, this paper argues that, even though technological innovations do offer spaces to create alternative realities, in a multi-lingual national context as in Malaysia, the interrelation between language and news content is an even more crucial element of constructing shared knowledge and collective identities.*

Keywords: systems theory, mass media, Internet, democratisation, language

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's freedom of the media is a highly contested one. Not only laws restrict the content of media, but also close personal and economic ties to the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN). Its dominant component parties, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) hold major shares in media companies that publish the main daily newspapers and have a significant influence on what is reported and what not. Since the late 1990s, Internet

increasingly challenges this information monopoly. Newly emerging news websites face less legal restrictions and operate more independently from political parties. It is often argued that this leads to a more diversified media landscape and eventually to a more democratic political system. In this article, I want to compare the coverage of the debate over *kalimah Allah* that triggered a massive uproar among Muslims in Malaysia, in three Malaysian newspapers, namely *Utusan Malaysia*, *The Star* and *MalaysiaKini* that operate on- and offline and publish in English as well as *Bahasa Malaysia*. The issue serves as a revealing example of the multi-faced dynamics of language, religion and ethnicity that are important issues in Malaysian politics. Given the highly controlled environment mass media operate in, this study aims at taking a closer look at the role of mass media in democratisation processes.

Most empirical studies of mass media in Asia focus on institutional or macro-structural dimensions of the relationship between mass media and democracy (Zaharom, 2008; Mustafa, 2005; Mohd. Azizuddin, 2004; Rodan, 2005; Crouch, 1996; Boulanger, 1993). There is also an increasing number of studies that focus on the importance of social agency and culture in producing and receiving media content (Holst, 2012; Tan and Zawawi, 2008; George, 2006; Hilley, 2001). However, most of these studies focus on English language media (see for example Holst, 2012; George 2008; Crouch 1996; Boulanger, 1993). But there is clear evidence for significant differences between English and vernacular content (Chew et al., 2012; Dafrizal, Faridah and Fauziah, 2011; Eichenauer, 2011; Halimahton, Ngu and Raman, 2006; Mustafa, 2005; Hilley, 2001; Wong, 2000). Moreover, most quantitative studies lack to draw on the highly effective entanglements between mass media, society, and the political system (Chew et al., 2012; Dafrizal, Faridah and Fauziah, 2011; Halimahton, Ngu and Raman, 2006).

Current research on Malaysia's mass media system addresses the issue of democratisation mainly in macro-structural terms, while studies on media content do barely engage a broader theoretical framework of democratisation. By using a systems theoretical approach to analyse the macro structural environment of the system of mass media and its relationship with the political system and combine it with a multi-lingual in-depth content analysis, this study aims to close this obvious gap.

MASS MEDIA AND DEMOCRATISATION FROM A SYSTEMS-THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Systems theory offers a pragmatic multidisciplinary framework (Krawietz and Welker, 1992: 9), which is able to overcome problems of cultural specification without falling into the trap of cultural-reductionist argumentation (Heinze, 2012: 64). Niklas Luhmann's approach of functional differentiation allows to combine

the analysis of mass media output (micro structure) with macro-structural specificities, which has been neglected so far. The focus on communication not only accommodates the research subject of mass media, but also "reflect[s] the societal transformations [towards an information society]" (Stichweh, 2000: 11) and places mass media in the centre of modern societies.

As Niklas Luhmann famously stated, everything we know about society and the world that surrounds us, we know through mass media (Luhmann, 2004: 9). Most information we use and refer to are obtained from mass-mediated communication, namely through TV, radio, newspapers, and, nowadays the Internet. The system of mass media is a result of functional differentiation of society. As every functional system, it operates in an autopoietic way, meaning it sustains and re-produces itself constantly. It observes the world, that is: what Luhmann calls its systemic environment, as a 2nd order observer (*Beobachter 2. Ordnung*), processes the input it gets from its systemic environment according to its specific binary code information/no information, and, if declared information, the input is processed further into news that can be consumed by an unknown audience.

Newspaper organisations such as *Utusan Malaysia*, *The Star*, *MalaysiaKini*, *TV3* and others have the power to single out information from non-information and communicate it to an audience. As organisations that work within the system of mass media, they are constantly influenced in their decisions through other systems. One of the major players is the judicial system, which sets rules on how the system of mass media and its components – the mass media organisations – should communicate. Also strongly coupled with the economic system, mass media organisations are enterprises operating in a capitalist economy with a rationale of generating profit and providing that information that is of interest for purchasing readers. An organisational culture develops (Luhmann, 2000: 242) that is influenced not only by external systemic irritations but also by inner-organisational structures such as ownership and income generation. This is reflected in its working routines, as well as decisions on publishing strategies and human resources. Due to these differences in organisational culture, decisions on what is coded as information and how it is communicated can differ significantly. Consequently, realities created through mass media and the shared knowledge they produce can differ, too. Therefore, mass media in a systems theoretical sense is by definition neither neutral nor absolutely free, since all information is filtered according to specific organisational routines and restraint by other functional systems.

By constructing and re-producing schemes of observation, the system of mass media creates a collectively shared social memory that serves as the foundation for communication of other systems (Luhmann, 2004: 192). This memory is essential for the perceptions of reality and the selection and interpretation of new information. Schemes are frames of perception that help to organise and interpret information and enable us to interact. Through the

existence of a diverse media landscape, not only one scheme is offered that can be accepted or declined, but a variety of observations, interpretations, and realities are represented. This acknowledges the idea of a shared common knowledge with the possibility of diverse individual interpretations that are more accessible and encouraged if there are already differing interpretations offered in public and prevents one from assuming a deterministic relationship between news dissemination and reception.

Public opinion is a key concept for the relationship of mass media and the political system. Defined as "publicly accessible, expressed opinion" (Luhmann, 2002: 285), it is the key medium through which the political system observes how it is perceived by others (Luhmann, 2004: 188) and it is predominantly communicated through mass media. Luhmann elevates mass media to the key functional system for the evolution of a democratic system, since "[w]ithout public opinion […] no opposition and with that no democracy would be possible" (Luhmann, 2002: 302). "The freedom […] to allow consent as much as dissent", Luhmann (2002: 300) communicated in a public space that is accessible and "useable" for each and every member of society becomes a key feature of a democratic political systems.

This study shows, that the Malaysian government takes various measures to irritate the system of mass media, i.e. by newspapers offering schemes particularly in favour of the ruling government and its political interests.

DEMOCRACY AND MASS MEDIA IN MALAYSIA

Since the late 19th century a vernacular press developed in British Malaya, which offered a perspective external both to the reports from the *kerajaan* (Milner, 2002: 97) and the colonial administration (Mohd. Dhari, 1992: 119) and thus presented a new way of looking at the world. At the same time it developed specific characteristics that are closely related to the emergence of segregated ethnic communities. National movements developed along linguistic and ethnic lines as they were reflected in the content of the vernacular newspapers. When the British returned after the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, they faced a very different Malaya. After political negotiations between the growing Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and the British colonial government for political participation failed the British declared an "Emergency" in June 1948. With the Emergency laws such as the Sedition Ordinance, the Security Ordinance and licensing mechanisms for printing presses and publications, more and more censorship laws came into place in order to curb an allegedly communist resistance. The relatively free vernacular press that has existed in British Malaya up until the 1940s became more and more restricted.

As one of Malaysia's colonial heritage the laws regulating the press are constantly adjusted according to the needs of the government of the independent

nation. The Security Ordinance became the Internal Security Act (ISA), the Sedition Ordinance was renamed into Sedition Act, the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984 (PPPA) drew on a former colonial ordinance (Zaharom, 2002: 123) and the Official Secrets Acts did not even encounter a name change. Recently, some of these laws have been amended. The Sedition Act changed into the Harmony Act (*MalaysiaKini*, 17 July 2013) and ISA (*MalaysiaKini*, 11 August 2013) was abolished to be replaced by the Security Ordinance (Special Measures) Act (SOSMA). Still, when facing criticisms from the opposition or human rights and media groups, national security remains the main argument when it comes to defending the rather cosmetic legal changes made in 2011 and 2012. Even though no direct censorship is applied and the right to freedom of speech is ensured in the constitution (Art. 10.1.), it is a highly contested topic. Freedom of speech is limited if it can pose a threat to (amongst others) national security or public order (Art. 10.2.). The definition of what is national security or public order and what can actually pose a threat then becomes crucial to the limits of this freedom. Newspaper organisations have to take these laws into consideration when creating and disseminating news publicly. In the aftermath of the riots in May 1969 the restrictions to freedom of speech were substantiated in a number of constitutional changes. Potentially "sensitive issues" such as the question of citizenship, *ketuanan Melayu*, *Bahasa Malaysia* as the national language and Islam as the national religion were banned from public debate. In addition to the legal adjustments the political influence of the ruling parties grew significantly since the 1970s. UMNO started an aggressive investment campaign and bought large shares of major Malaysian newspaper companies and the MCA went to heavily invest in the Chinese language press and *The Star* (Zaharom, 2002: 115–116; Wong, 2000: 125–127). Hence, "encouraged" by aggressive investment campaigns of the parties in the ruling coalition the media became almost entirely supportive of the government and its nation-building efforts (Wong, 2000: 125).

Overall, one can observe that the system of mass media in independent Malay(si)a was confronted with more and more irritations by the judicial and increasingly too by the political system. Opportunities to communicate dissent and offer alternative observations while at the same time not endangering the existence of the organisation became extremely limited or risky. These mechanisms to control the mass mediated flow of information were challenged with the rise of the Internet and online communication since the 1990s. In the name of economic growth and development a *Bill of Guarantees* was drawn that ensured that the Internet in Malaysia will not be censored (Abbott, 2004: 82). Even though the issue of regulating the Internet comes up regularly, there is currently no direct censorship or filtering in the Malaysian cyberspace. The effects showed for the first time in the wake of the Malaysian *reformasi* movement. Shortly after Malaysia, as the first country in Southeast Asia, offered public access to the Internet, critical voices began to be heard in cyberspace

(Rodan, 2005: 152–155). As Malaysians took to the streets to demand more transparency and civil liberties after the sacking of then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim the Internet became a source of alternative information (Mustafa, 2002: 163). *MalaysiaKini* started its work in November 1999 thus satisfying a need for information that could not be provided from government-affiliated newspapers.

> […] Our job is to highlight problems. Not because we are anti-government per se, but because we want to be different from the traditional media. If we had no competition out there, we would provide both the positive and negative. But, as things stand, our mission is to highlight the negative.

(Interview with Steven Gan, in George, 2006: 163)

It is collectively owned by its founders Steven Gan, Premesh Chandran, and current and former staff members. While *MalaysiaKini* main sources of income are readership subscriptions and advertising revenues it also receives funds from various international foundations that are listed on its website. Up to now it offers daily reporting in all four official languages by professional journalists that include exclusive stories that are not covered by the print media at all and increasingly influences the selection of topics of mainstream media (Chin, 2003: 132–133).

The Internet developed "into a more mature, alternative, independent medium" (Abbott, 2004: 85) and a trustworthy source of information with readers expecting the same accuracy as with traditional media. As a result, the government, at least partly, lost its power to set the agenda and create shared realities (Case, 2004: 40). A relatively autonomous system of mass media that developed in Malaysia during the colonial period and after independence became more and more infiltrated by the political system. Mass media, first and foremost the politically controlled subsystems of print and electronic media, increasingly changed from disseminating news in order to create socially shared realities, to mass media operating in order to prepare socially binding decisions. This way, the political system increasingly blocks the autopoiesis of the system of mass media and takes over its function of preparing collectively binding decisions through the creation of shared realities. The system of mass media starts to operate not only according to its own code, but more and more according to the code of the political system (Luhmann, 2002: 88). Doing so, mainstream mass media increasingly became corrupted by the political system (Neves, 2012) since the 1970s and thus contributed to the erosion of the Malaysian electorate's democratic right to information (Mustafa, 2005: 28). With the emergence of the Internet on the other hand a subsystem of online mass media has emerged which has the opportunity to develop fairly uncorrupted by the political system.

THE DEBATE OVER *KALIMAH ALLAH*

It was shown that Malaysia's political as well as its media landscape is strongly interwoven with its ethnic and religious composition. With Islam and Malay culture constantly under threat, other religions became a target for discriminating politics. Since the mid-eighties the use of religion-related words that stem from the Arabic language has become a contentious issue in Malaysia. In 1989, 42 terms considered to be "Islamic" were forbidden to use for non-Muslims (Riddell, 2005: 167). In the following years the gazette was neither challenged legally nor were Christians practically disturbed in their congregations by the authorities (Ding, 2010). This "don't ask – don't tell" – practice lasted some 20 years until the gazette was rediscovered in 2007 to finally put it into practice. The printing permit for the Catholic weekly magazine *The Herald* for the year 2008 came along with "publication guidelines" that prohibited the words *Allah*, *Solat*, *Kaabah* and *Baitullah* in its *Bahasa Malaysia* edition. The Archbishop Tan Sri Murphy Pakiam took legal action and filed a judicial review in which he claimed that the conditions were beyond the Ministry's authority and that they would be unconstitutional, going against freedom of speech and autonomy in religious matters. Both the Archbishops complaints and the judge's arguments were the same as they were in December 2009: the decision was "illegal, null and void" and it went beyond the competence of the Home Ministry (*MalaysiaKini*, 31 December 2009). Applications for reviews and stays were filed from both sides until the end of the year. In December the printing permission was granted for three of the four languages, namely English, Mandarin and Tamil. *The Herald* in *Bahasa Malaysia* was not allowed to publish (*The Star*, 2 January 2009). The process continued throughout 2009 until on 31st December it was decided that banning of the word *Allah* in Christian publications is illegal. It violated the constitution and no threat to national security could be proved.

A fierce debate on- and offline arose after the decision. Arguments pro and contra the decision were disseminated through various channels. The main arguments on the "contra-side" circled around theological approaches that *Allah* could not be used to refer to the Christian trinity, that the issue itself would be an Islamic one and thus cannot be decided upon by a secular court. Also, it opens the possibility for misuse and hidden proselytising and it would finally insult Malaysian Muslims, and thus might challenge ethnic and religious harmony and in the process destabilise the nation. Arguments that supported the decision were mainly based on claims of freedom of speech and the free practice of religion, the long-standing use of the word in churches and Christian publications and equally theological "proofs" that the word *Allah* would not be exclusive to Islam. Predominantly right-wing Muslim groups started to protest and staged rallies during their Friday prayers and little more than a week after the controversial decision, Malaysia gained international attention when churches came under arson attacks in January 2010. After appeals back and forth the Malaysian High

Court finally decided in January 2015 the ban of the word in *The Herald*s *Bahasa Malaysia* edition was legal and "procedural unfairness" could not be found (Mayberry, 2015) therewith closing the case that has been going on for eight years.

NEWSPAPER ANALYSIS

In the following I will analyse the first week of reporting after the High Court's decision in 2009. Overall, with more than two million print-papers, *Bahasa Malaysia* is the dominating language in creating Malaysia's reality, at least in quantitative terms. Despite decreasing circulation figures and a crisis of legitimation in 1998, *Utusan Malaysia* still serves as an "agenda-setter" (Kessler, 2011) for Malaysia's mass media landscape. *The Star*, with nearly 280,000 pieces per day, is the most widely read English language commercial daily newspaper. The analysed online newspaper *MalaysiaKini* offers daily reporting by professional journalists that include exclusive stories that are not covered by the print media at all and increasingly influences the selection of topics of mainstream media (Chin, 2003: 132–133). It also publishes most articles in all four official languages in Malaysia.

Every article that appeared in the observed period (1st January–7th January 2010) that had the "*Allah* issue" as the main topic and those that appeared in the nation-wide sections was collected. While the English-language print newspaper *The Star* published 14 articles, *Utusan Malaysia* published 57 articles in the relevant sections *Berita Utama* and *Dalam Negeri*. As an online newspaper *MalaysiaKini* often reports events on the very same day the events take place. In order to be comparable to the print newspapers the time period was adjusted from 31st December 2009 to 6th January 2010, altogether 33 articles were selected.

First, a content analysis was conducted and all events that were reported were listed (Table 1). In a second step schemes of observation were detected for each newspaper. A frame analysis was conducted for each newspaper to extract the schemes of observation in Luhmann's sense.

By looking at the topics (Table 1), there are a number of events that are covered by two or even all three newspapers, even though in different intensity and with different undertones. *MalaysiaKini* is the only newspaper that covers all events in the table. Extensive background information is offered, that is clearly in favour of the High Court's decision. Still, in *MalaysiaKini* arguments against the decision are found, mostly through *Bernama* releases that are published unchanged. But in contrast to *Utusan Malaysia*, *MalaysiaKini* publishes far less articles on right-wing Malay non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as Perkasa. *Utusan Malaysia*'s and *The Star*'s coverage is more selective. *The Star* omits information on protests and sidelines comments from UMNO members that

openly oppose the decision. *Utusan Malaysia* omits MCA's position, the hacking of *The Herald*, and the critique voiced on the legal process and the role of the police. Both print papers do not include voices from East Malaysia and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) in their creation of reality.

Table 1: Coverage of events

	UM (n = 57)	TS (n = 14)	MK (n = 33)
The legal proceedings	x	x	x
Intervention of the King	x	x	x
Defense Minister Zahid on Christian conversion intentions	x		x
Khalid Samad (PAS) vs. Zulkilfi Nordin (PKR)	x	x	x
Protest of Muslim NGOs in Penang	x		x
Hacking of Herald's website		x	x
Najib's urges to "stay calm"	x	x	x
Muhiyiddin's statement on "sensitive issue"	x	x	x
Mahathir Mohamad's statement on Christian misunderstanding	x		x
MCA's statement		x	x
PAS' process of forming an official party opinion	x	x	x
Critique of the legal proceedings		x	x
Statements of DAP representatives			x
Muslim NGOs and individuals in favour of the decision		x	x
Muslim NGOs and individuals against the decision	x	x	x
Other religious groups		x	x

Note: UM – *Utusan Malaysia*; TS – *The Star*; MK – *MalaysiaKini; PAS – Parti Islam Se-Malaysia; PKR – Parti Keadilan Rakyat; DAP – Democratic Action Party; NGO – Non-governmental organisation*

The coverage of each of the newspapers differs in many respects, but similarities in content can be found. *The Star* published relatively few articles. Hence, it is difficult to extract schemes, but three could be detected that resonate well with the schemes of the other newspapers. In *Utusan Malaysia* that published most on the debate over *kalimah Allah* much stronger schemes of observation emerged here. Changes in established schemes can also be observed.

The schemes of observation that *MalaysiaKini* develops are strikingly different from the ones found in *Utusan Malaysia* and *The Star*. Though they focus on similar topics, they develop strings of arguments that oftentimes directly contradict the ones print media – first and foremost *Utusan Malaysia* – offers.

Table 2 shows dominant schemes of observation that emerged. These can be subsumed under four main themes.

Table 2: Schemes of observation

	The Star	*Utusan Malaysia*	*MalaysiaKini*
Nation	National harmony	National security	National unity
Law	*Rechtsstaat (rule of law)*	Jurisdictions	Constitution *Rechtsstaat (rule of law)*
Tradition/religion	Tradition	Islamic *ummah* Theology Accusation	Tradition
Politics		Party politics	Party politics

The Star

The dominant schemes of *The Star* focus on issues of national harmony, legal proceedings and the tradition of using the word *Allah* by non-Muslims. Both members of the opposition and the ruling coalition appear in *The Star's* construction of reality through direct quotations. On first glance, no bias towards the ruling coalition can be found and members of the opposition parties Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) are extensively referred to without being depicted negatively (*The Star*, 7 January 2010a). It is striking, however, that the only opposition parties appearing in *The Star's* coverage are the Muslim party PAS and the Muslim-dominated, though multi-ethnic PKR. They serve to create a Muslim public that is accommodative towards the High Court's decision. Other opposition parties, such as the DAP are missing in its creation of reality, presumably because the DAP is seen as a direct opponent of the MCA in the fight for votes of the ethnicised Chinese-Malaysian community. Here it can be seen how the affiliation to a certain political party affects the organisational routines and decision making processes of *The Star's* editorial board.

A diversity of opinion is shown among representatives of various faiths and even among Muslims. *The Star* increasingly deals with practices that involve the word *Allah* in a non- (exclusively) Muslim context. One article refers to a century's long tradition of *Bahasa Malaysia* speaking Sikhs and Christians using

Allah (*The Star*, 5 January 2010e). Compared to the statement of Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin on the same day in which he acknowledges the centuries long use of the word *Allah* by Christians in Sabah and Sarawak (*The Star*, 5 January 2010a), the usage of *Allah* in non-Islamic congregations here is neither restricted to East Malaysia nor to Christians only.

The Archbishop and his representatives are cited whenever the court proceedings are mentioned (*The Star*, 5 January 2010e; 6 January 2010b). Non-Muslim groups however do not address the religious dimension of the issue, but rather comment on the state of the nation, the constitution or the importance of inter-religious harmony. Adhering to the regulations by Malaysia's Islamic courts that allow only Muslims to comment on Islamic matters, religious explanations on the *Allah*-issue are voiced solely by Muslims, and as mentioned above predominantly Muslim members of opposition parties. Religious explanations that counter the use of the word *Allah* by non-Muslims cannot be found. There is also no hint that the Malay or Muslim community in Malaysia might feel side-lined or under threat. Except for a few indirect statements on potential upcoming protests (*The Star*, 5 January 2010e; 7 January 2010a; 7 January 2010b), no actual protests are reported in *The Star*'s national coverage in connection to the *Allah*-issue. Rather, the focus is on understanding and the need for dialogue between the religions.

In Luhmann's terms *The Star*, with its quantitatively few articles on the issue already offers a variety of observation schemes, communicating different stands on the issue. Interestingly, despite its close connection to the MCA, *The Star* offers a scheme of observation that is highly critical of the Malaysian judiciary, therewith countering assumptions that newspapers affiliated to government parties are highly uncritical of state matters. However, as will be seen in the following, its coverage of the legal procedure again follows a strategic bias that emerges when it is directly compared to *Utusan Malaysia*'s reporting.

Utusan Malaysia

With *Utusan Malaysia*'s coverage, it becomes clear how schemes of observation are taken up, re-created and intensified in the course of the debate. Six dominant schemes can be extracted from the data.

The national security frame is the most prominent scheme of observation that *Utusan Malaysia* develops. Reports on protests and gatherings that counter the decision can be found every day. Some feature direct quotes that include open threats against *orang bukan Islam* (non-Muslim) and construct an image of uncontrollable violence (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2 January 2010i; 4 January 2010d; 4 January 2010g). Nevertheless, protesting Muslim groups are never criticised or even warned by government officials or the police, as it was the case in *The Star*'s reporting. Rather the protesting groups are portrayed as a homogeneous uprising civil society against religious and constitutional injustice (*Utusan Malaysia*,

6 January 2010b) and UMNO officials are depicted as voices of reason, that warn against potential threats to national security and social unrest (*Utusan Malaysia*, 6 January 2010c; 6 January 2010d). The sensitivity of the issue is stressed every day and can be found in most of the articles. Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin for example is cited saying that "for hundreds of years this problem did not appear and now these new developments spark an atmosphere that has to be handled together and with care" (*Utusan Malaysia*, 5 January 2010a)[2] and he assumes that religious and communal relations are already strained (*Utusan Malaysia*, 5 January 2010a).

The Islamic-*ummah*-scheme portrays the "*Allah* issue" as a sign of the weakness of the Islamic community in the country. Threats that the Malaysian *ummah* would become weak and fragmented and calls for a united Islamic community that transgresses political differences dominate this scheme. Consequently, many articles feature calls for the unity of Muslims and Muslim parties that also include opposition parties (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2 January 2010h; 4 January 2010b). NGOs that are cited speak up for unity among Malays (that are by definition Muslim) (*Utusan Malaysia*, 4 January 2010g). Even the call of Deputy President of PAS, Nasharruddin Mat Isa, for a united *ummah* is quoted, given that PAS at this point still shares the dominant view *Utusan Malaysia* has been creating so far (*Utusan Malaysia*, 4 January 2010g). This scheme of observation draws its particular strength by including many different voices, ranging from members of the civil society, to the government, opposition parties and religious leaders. As a result of the High Court's decision and the weakness of the Islamic community in Malaysia, Islam itself is threatened and vulnerable to insults (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2 January 2010b). It also offers a line of argument that strengthens the participation of a unified Islamic civil society for the sake of the sacredness of Islam and inter-religious harmony. As a side effect, UMNO is constructed as a party with strong public support. This connects it strongly to the national security scheme. As we will see in the following, it is also densely interwoven with the weakening of the secular jurisprudence and the demonisation of political opposition parties.

The outline of the jurisdiction frame is already set on the first day after the decision. *Utusan Malaysia* carries a full article with Perkasa president Ali Ibrahim demanding the Sultans, as heads of Islam, to challenge the decision of the High Court (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2 January 2010b). On the next day, various articles cite members of Islamic NGOs and the Islamic academia, stressing that, despite feeling uneasy, the decision has to be accepted (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2 January 2010b; 2 January 2010d). The responsibility of the Sultans is mentioned throughout the week. Islamic authorities should step in and work together with the government in order to avoid further confusion and to re-establish Islam's position in the federation (*Utusan Malaysia*, 3 January 2010a; 3 January 2010b; 3 January 2010c, 3 January 2010l; 3 January 2010p; 7 January 2010b; 7 January 2010e). Arguments against the legitimacy of the High Court as

the legal authority in this particular case increase and statements on respecting its decision become less in the course of the week. Instead it is increasingly argued that the Sultans as religious and cultural heads of the states should intervene. *Utusan Malaysia*'s coverage suggests that it is not without question if the High Court would have the judicial power to decide on the use of the word *Allah* or if it should be dealt with as an Islamic issue (*Utusan Malaysia*, 3 January 2010e; 3 January 2010m; 4 January 2010a; 4 January 2010c; 7 January 2010h). At the same time, a strong connection between the acceptance of a judicial authority and national security is constructed. While some articles cover UMNO members who stress the necessity to stick to the legal process, as the only way to ensure political stability (*Utusan Malaysia*, 3 January 2010l; 3 January 2010o), one also warns that the High Court's decision could trigger religious and ethnic disturbances and pose a threat to national security (*Utusan Malaysia*, 3 January 2010l). Hence, the government launches an appeal against the High Court's decision which stresses that it "aims at safeguarding the sacredness of Islam in Malaysia" (*Utusan Malaysia*, 3 January 2010e). By referring to the responsibility of the Islamic courts, and in constantly raising the threat to national security, the High Court's decision can be openly challenged without questioning Malaysia as a *Rechtsstaat (rule of law)* per se in order to ensure national security and the position of Islam.

The political party scheme is constructed through statements that refer to the position of Muslim-majority parties in Malaysia. The depiction of the opposition parties is particularly revealing and shows how this scheme evolves and changes in the course of the first week after the decision. Non-Muslim parties do not play a role. Even the position of UMNO's coalition partner MCA is not communicated. It is only referred to the freedom of expression of various opinions within the ruling coalition (*Utusan Malaysia*, 6 January 2010a), a remark that also points to democratic principles that are practised within BN. Hence, the only relevant parties existing in *Utusan Malaysia*'s reality are UMNO, PAS and PKR. Many articles depict UMNO's position and involvement through different spokespersons and party sections (*Utusan Malaysia*, 3 January 2010e; 3 January 2010i; 3 January 2010j; 3 January 2010k; 3 January 2010n; 3 January 2010o). UMNO itself is represented as "the biggest party that represents the Islamic *ummah* in this country [...] that will keep fighting for issues related to this religion[3]" (*Utusan Malaysia*, 3 January 2010j). Muslim voices that support the High Court's decision on the other hand are exclusively communicated through members of the opposition parties (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2 January 2010g; 4 January 2010e; 4 January 2010h; 5 January 2010b). Towards the end of the first week, this position gets increasingly demonised and the Wednesday and Thursday editions each cater long articles that openly accuse the opposition parties of using the *Allah*-issue for political gains and therewith splitting and weakening the Malaysian *ummah* (*Utusan Malaysia*, 7 January 2010f). One article, for example, starts with the following accusation:

Ketika umat Islam negara ini tanpa mengira perbezaan politik bersatu hati menentang penggunaan kalimah Allah oleh agama lain, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) tampil dengan pendirian berbeza apabila menyokong keputusan Mahkamah Tinggi Kuala Lumpur.
[Translated: At a time when the Muslim *ummah*, irrespective of their political differences in this country are united against the use of the term *Allah* by people of other religions, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) emerged with a different position that sided with the decision of the Kuala Lumpur High Court.]

(*Utusan Malaysia*, 6 January 2010g)

While PAS and PKR put Islam under threat for political reasons, UMNO is depicted as the preserver of Muslim unity and the sacredness of Islam. This is furthermore substantiated by *Utusan Malaysia*'s reporting of a unified Islamic civil society, created through the extensive re-presentation of Muslim NGOs and scholars and the constant reference to "the *ummah*" or "the *rakyat*". Hence, an image develops in which UMNO is not only the preserver of Islam, but also acting on behalf of the people and, as became clear in the schemes above therefore safeguarding inter-religious harmony and national unity. This scheme furthermore shows how certain lines of argumentation change in the course of the debate. While early articles were less concerned with scapegoating fellow Muslim parties, the last two days of the analysed period show a significant re-creation of the scheme towards demonising the political opposition. In the course of the debate the argumentation increasingly overlaps with the Islamic-*ummah*-scheme.

The theology scheme refers to explanations of the *Allah*-issue based on theological arguments. Dominating it is the juxtaposing of different concepts of God. The Islamic concept of *Allah* would be fundamentally different from the Christian concept of Trinity (*Utusan Malaysia*, 6 January 2010d; 7 January 2010e; 7 January 2010g) which is emotionally expanded by quotes like "*Apakah perasaan orang Islam apabila diganti dengan Allah* is dead?" [Translated: "What are the feelings of Muslims when it is replaced by *Allah* is dead?"] (*Utusan Malaysia*, 6 January 2010d). Statements that offer an alternative interpretation of the issue appear, with one exception (*Utusan Malaysia*, 5 January 2010b), always in connection with counter arguments that are based on theological interpretations Malaysia's cultural specificity (*Utusan Malaysia*, 3 January 2010c; 6 January 2010a). They also include warnings of potential consequences for society and increasingly also for personal piety. To allow that the word *Allah* be used by Christians would be a great sin (*Utusan Malaysia*, 7 January 2010e) and can endanger the sacredness of Islam (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2 January 2010b).

The accusation scheme of observation is strongest in the first half of the analysed period. Functioning as a scheme that constructs a non- or even anti-

Muslim. Other, it gets slowly replaced by the political party scheme later in the week. The accusation scheme refers to non-Muslims, especially Christians, who are constructed as perpetrators who deliberately defame Islam and the Muslim community.

Most articles that refer to non-Muslim actors openly accuse other religions of using the word *Allah* deliberately to confuse the people. A fear is constantly created that the word could be used inappropriately by adherents of non-Islamic religions (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2 January 2010a; 2 January 2010b; 2 January 2010d; 4 January 2010a) and foreign Christian groups aim at converting Muslims to Christianity (*Utusan Malaysia*, 7 January 2010g). Others are cited saying that "this publisher [*The Herald*] has a hidden agenda" (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2 January 2010b, see also *Utusan Malaysia*, 4 January 2010c). Even high ranking ministers such as the Defense Minister and Deputy President of UMNO, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi join in (*Utusan Malaysia*, 4 January 2010a) and former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad is reported stressing the misunderstanding of the Christian community (*Utusan Malaysia*, 3 January 2010p). Voices of non-Muslims or the Archbishop as editor of *The Herald* himself cannot be found. At the same time, remarks on the actual practice of using the word *Allah* in non-Muslim contexts are nearly absent. One outlier mentions the century long use in East Malaysia (*Utusan Malaysia*, 5 January 2010c). Only a day later, Mahathir Mohamad is paraphrased claiming that "since today it was never heard of Christians in the Malaysian Peninsular using this word [*Allah*], but speaking about *God* in Bahasa Melayu"[4] (*Utusan Malaysia*, 6 January 2010d), therewith relativising the banality of the practice.

As we have seen, the schemes are strongly interrelated and do overlap. *Utusan Malaysia* creates a coherent reality with different strings of argumentation supporting each other and no controversy on the issue within *Utusan Malaysia*'s coverage can be detected. UMNO and NGO voices are cited arguing in unison against the High Court's decision. Counterarguments are either missing or voiced as opposition opinions that at the same time endanger Islam and national harmony. Arguments in support of the decision are weakened and side-lined and there are no voices from Christians themselves present in *Utusan Malaysia*'s reality. Also voices from the coalition partners are marginalised in order not to show differences within the coalition. Interestingly, in *Utusan Malaysia*'s reporting direct threats or ill-willing allegations to the Christian community frequently appear and are re-presented in headlines, images and quotes. These are supported by statements from (often high-ranking) UMNO politicians warning that the debate should not be played out in public. On the one hand this reflects the official view on potentially controversial public debates which has been outlined above. On the other hand, seen in the context of *Utusan Malaysia*'s coverage of the highly controversial "*Allah* issue", the newspaper does exactly the opposite by publishing a remarkable, though highly selective number of opinions and even threats. This also sheds an interesting light on

Utusan Malaysia's irritations by the legal system. While it was outlined above that print newspapers are strongly irritated in their operations through strict laws on the freedom of speech, first and foremost charges of sedition and internal security, *Utusan Malaysia* seems relatively unaffected.

MalaysiaKini

MalaysiaKini offers five main schemes of observation. National unity is a strong scheme in *MalaysiaKini*'s creation of reality. It publishes regular concerns of predominantly UMNO politicians over national security and threats to national unity. If statements against the decision are published, they are surrounded by articles that appear to comment on and complement the view of the ruling party. Many raise concerns that appealing the High Court's decision would not be "a step that aids national unity" (*MalaysiaKini*, 4 January 2010e), or that the prohibition of the word for non-Muslims would result in a massive backlash and a danger to religious and ethnic tolerance (*MalaysiaKini*, 6 January 2010e). These arguments become even stronger through the continuous stressing of every day practice in Sabah and Sarawak. In contrast to *Utusan Malaysia*, intolerance and the prohibition of allowing non-Muslims to use the word *Allah* become a threat to national unity (*MalaysiaKini*, 3 January 2010b; 4 January 2010a; 5 January 2010f; 6 January 2010e). But instead of evoking fear, voices are cited that not only stress the importance of the decision for national unity, but also calm down potentially alienated Muslims. A PKR member is cited saying that "there is no need for the Muslim community in Malaysia to overreact or fear that their religion is under threat" (*MalaysiaKini*, 4 January 2010a). Similarly, Father Andrew is cited directly ensuring that "[t]here should not be a cause for concern because some people have got the idea that we are out to convert (Muslims), but not at all, there is no question of this" (*MalaysiaKini*, 5 January 2010a). An inter-religious dialogue is represented throughout the week. Catholic support for the Islamic party PAS is depicted (*MalaysiaKini*, 6 January 2010b), and oftentimes Muslims and non-Muslims alike refer to each other (*MalaysiaKini*, 5 January 2010g; 5 January 2010h). Abdul Aziz Bari, law expert from the International Islamic University, welcomes the decision and the fact that some Muslims also support it (*MalaysiaKini*, 2 January 2010c). A consensus in support of the High Court's decision across political parties, ethnicities and religions that is sustained by members of religious, political and academic organisations is constructed, but in contrast to *Utusan Malaysia*'s reporting, there is no homogeneous *ummah* that opposes the use of the word *Allah* by non-Muslims.

The scheme of National Unity is also supported by the frequent mentioning of Prime Minister Najib's most recent campaign *1Malaysia*. While in *MalaysiaKini*'s reporting many members of the public and also the parties of the opposition coalition refer to the decision as a representation of the concept of *1Malaysia* (*MalaysiaKini*, 31 December 2009; 5 January 2010g; 5 January

2010h; 6 January 2010e), it is never depicted in relation to UMNO, nor is the campaign mentioned in any of the analysed print newspapers.

Instead, DAP member Dominique Ng is cited giving a definition of national unity that embeds freedom of speech and religion:

> He described the fact that Muslim clerics and many Malay-Muslims have expressed support for sharing the term "*Allah*" as "heart-warming" and a "defining moment in communal relations". This is a most positive national unity development which BN would be well advised to embrace rather than resist through another court challenge, and thus seem to encourage other acts stoking social tension, he said.

(*MalaysiaKini*, 5 January 2010f)

The scheme of national unity is deeply interrelated with the scheme of party politics. It evolves around two main topics. The political implications of the debate for UMNO are analysed and depicted in various articles. Moderate UMNO statements do also appear, but they are confronted with articles that question the god-will, that UMNO politicians voice in public. They offer different points of view and construct a scheme that creates a complex reality of the relation between politics and religious issues in Malaysia. In a number of articles, UMNO is heavily criticised for using the issue for political gains thereby putting national unity at stake (*MalaysiaKini*, 4 January 2010e; 5 January 2010a). This accusation has been presented in *Utusan Malaysia* as well, but with reverse actors. A second string is the deconstruction of *Barisan Nasional* as a united force. MCA's critical stand is published at length. MCA member Gan Ping Sieu is depicted extensively in his attempt to deconstruct arguments of the opponents, that it would lead to confusion and that the use of the word *Allah* by non-Muslims would not have any tradition in Malaysia or Arab speaking countries. Though not mentioned directly, it is obvious that here Gan confronts not only "certain ethnic- and religious-based NGOs" (*MalaysiaKini*, 5 January 2010b), but also UMNO members and former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad as well, all of which were cited in the days after the decision (*MalaysiaKini*, 2 January 2010d; 2 January 2010e; 4 January 2010c). *Barisan Nasional* is challenged "to show that it can measure closer to the religious understanding and tolerance shown by PAS and Pakatan Rakyat" (*MalaysiaKini*, 5 January 2010g). *Pakatan Rakyat* on the other hand is represented as a coalition united in its stand on the *Allah*-issue (*MalaysiaKini*, 5 January 2010g; 5 January 2010h; 6 January 2010e), that not only crosses bridges between PAS, DAP and PKR, but also between the peninsular and East Malaysia.

Similar to *The Star*, *MalaysiaKini* takes in the *Rechtsstaat (rule of law)* scheme the independence of Malaysia's judicial system into question. The involvements of UMNO in the preparations of the demonstrations are reported

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(*MalaysiaKini*, 6 January 2010c; 6 January 2010d; 6 January 2010f) and information is given that calls to demonstrate are circulated on "anti-PKR and pro-UMNO blogs" (*MalaysiaKini*, 6 January 2010c). Two articles report in detail about irregularities within the police in dealing with activities against the High Court's decision that could "[...] leave a negative effect on the relationship between those of different races and religions" (*MalaysiaKini*, 5 January 2010g). Similarly, the headline "Fair hearing 'difficult', says Herald editor" already suggests that the legal process could proceed in a biased way against *The Herald*. Hence, calls of Prime Minister Najib and other UMNO representatives (*MalaysiaKini*, 2 January 2010a; 3 January 2010b; 4 January 2010b; 6 January 2010h) for a legal solution of the issue are countered, or at least questioned, through critical reports in the course of the week.

Related to the *Rechtsstaat (rule of law)* scheme is the constitution scheme. Many articles refer to the constitutional right of religious freedom (*MalaysiaKini*, 31 December 2009; 2 January 2010c; 4 January 2010e; 5 January 2010b). Here, the ban is depicted as an act which goes against the Constitution of the federation that ensures freedom of religion. It is juxtaposed with arguments that perceive national security under threat (*MalaysiaKini*, 31 December 2009). UMNO Vice President and Defense Minister Zahid, for example, is cited stating that "Malaysia is a country that comprises of a multi-racial population with freedom of religion" (*MalaysiaKini*, 3 January 2010a), therewith seeing it necessary to cut back religious freedom (for non-Muslims) for the sake of a multi-racial/multi-religious society. Here, religious diversity is a threat to national unity if not regulated. Countering this, a legal expert from the International Islamic University, Abdul Aziz Bari, is cited saying: "If democracy and constitution have been respected we would have now gone beyond all these petty issues" (*MalaysiaKini*, 4 January 2010e). He defends constitutional rights without indicating a potential threat to national security or the special position of Islam, thus countering various UMNO statements to show that there is no need to compromise the constitution for the sake of the nation nor Islam.

Another prominent scheme that strongly interrelates with the others is the tradition scheme. Here, the *Allah*-issue is constantly represented as a "non-issue" (*MalaysiaKini*, 6 January 2010e). Most articles end with the following paragraph:

> *The Herald*, which is printed in four languages, has been using the word "*Allah*" as a translation for "God" in its Malay-language section, but the government then argued that the word should be used only by Muslims. The term "*Allah*" is widely used among indigenous Christian tribes in Sabah and Sarawak, many of whom speak Bahasa Malaysia.

> (*MalaysiaKini*, 31 December 2009)

It is re-presented as a long standing everyday practice which is substantiated by a number of articles that are published in the following days. MCA member Gan Ping Sieu is cited referring to the traditional use of *Allah* in Malaysia by the Sikh community and Munshi Abdullah's translation of the word for God (*MalaysiaKini*, 5 January 2010c). Two articles deal with the situation in East Malaysia. It is explained that due to work and educational migration more Malaysians moved from Sabah and Sarawak to the peninsular and brought with them their ways of worship, including using the word *Allah* in a Christian context (*MalaysiaKini*, 5 January 2010k; 6 January 2010e). They answer Mahathir Mohamad's question "Why the need to use the term now?" (*MalaysiaKini*, 5 January 2010b) and counter Zahid's statement that it has never been the case that the word *Allah* would be used in writing by other religions (*MalaysiaKini*, 3 January 2010a).

This last scheme shows well how *MalaysiaKini* constructs a reality that is so strikingly different from *Utusan Malaysia*'s despite publishing many *Bernama* articles, most of which can be found in *Utusan Malaysia* as well. While *Utusan* surrounds these articles with other reports that stress security, danger and ill-will, an overall picture of fear and inter-religious tension is created. *MalaysiaKini* on the other hand offers reports stressing communal harmony, tradition and dialogue, their reality focuses on unity among the Malaysian public and political power games behind the debate.

In general, *MalaysiaKini* offers various schemes of observation through which the decision of the High Court can be observed. These schemes are positive towards the decision. It is harshly critical of the ruling party UMNO, while opposition parties are depicted in a positive light. Members of various *Pakatan Rakyat* parties are portrayed as engaging in a constructive inter-faith dialogue. Arguments in favour of the decision are represented as reasonable and mirroring an informed academic discourse. This academic discourse is also part of *MalaysiaKini*'s reporting. They also offer the most comprehensive account on the MCA, though it being a component party of the ruling coalition. *MalaysiaKini* also de-centers the debate and includes voices from East Malaysia (*MalaysiaKini*, 5 January 2010k; 6 January 2010e), while the *The Star* and *Utusan Malaysia* neglect the region that are most affected by the debate in their national editions.

In *MalaysiaKini*'s narrative, national unity and security are under threat when religious minorities are not granted their constitutionally enshrined right to freely practice their religion in their native language. This right is challenged through various NGOs and even UMNO itself in *MalaysiaKini*'s reality, a detail that is missing in *The Star*'s version of the issue. Quite contrary to other creations of the *Allah*-issue, the usage of *Allah* is even seen as a sign of national unity and the effect of nation-building efforts through the spread of the national language *Bahasa Malaysia* to East Malaysia (*MalaysiaKini*, 5 January 2010k).

DISCUSSION

As was discussed earlier, *Utusan Malaysia* constructs the *Allah*-issue as a new phenomenon – at least in peninsular Malaysia and repeatedly draws on theological differences and the irreconcilability of Islam and Christianity. *MalaysiaKini* on the other hand offers schemes of observation that not only constantly refer to the traditional day-to-day practice of using the word in non-Muslim contexts, but time and again re-presents examples and arguments that stress similarities and solidarity between Malaysians regardless of origin and religion. They seem to actively counter *Utusan Malaysia*'s narrative that favours UMNO's position by de-legitimising their construction of reality. Furthermore, while *The Star* offers a scheme of national unity that creates national unity as a given that is not endangered, because the ruling government handles the issue carefully, *Utusan Malaysia* sees the enforcement of Malay and Islamic supremacy as the only option to ensure national unity. *MalaysiaKini* on the other hand creates this supremacy as the main problem of inter-ethnic relations.

I have outlined above that a requirement for democracy in a systems theoretical sense is the public accessibility to different schemes of observation. In order to form an individual opinion, the possibility to observe the political system through different, even contradictory schemes of observation must be given. By looking at what information was communicated by which newspaper and what schemes of observation emerged, I was able to show how media functions, and how different realities were created. We have seen that even the print newspapers *The Star* and *Utusan Malaysia* offer different schemes despite facing strong irritations from the judicial system. A micro-level perspective that only looks at the contents of the articles would lead to the conclusion that Malaysia is a pretty well functioning democracy – even within this restricted environment and without taking the less regulated Internet into consideration. But do these different schemes of observation lead to a real chance for the opposition to switch into government (Luhmann 2002: 101)? Or do they rather prepare collectively binding decisions?

The analysis of the structure of Malaysian mass media showed that the system of mass media in Malaysia is heavily corrupted by the political system. This suggests that the print newspapers do not operate according to the code information/non-information to create a shared reality, but rather operate in order to prepare collectively binding decisions (in favour of the parties in power). As already outlined, gaps in *Utusan Malaysia*'s coverage are comprehensively covered by *The Star* and vice versa. Though different, even contradictory in content, we find similarities in their publishing strategy. Both report in favour of the parties they are affiliated with. *Utusan Malaysia* stresses and strongly supports UMNO's position against the High Court's decision, while *The Star* highlights MCA's position and surrounds it with articles on equally supportive events. At the same time, they are cautious not to communicate dissent among

the component parties of *Barisan Nasional*. The ruling coalition is constantly created as a unity, at least in the sense that differences of opinion between them do not enter their realities. At the same time, both newspapers draw on the ethnic and religious divide MCA and UMNO are built upon. Each creates a reality that suggests ethnic and religious tensions and constructs a threat to national security. Therewith, one can argue that dissenting schemes emerge in print media, despite both being government affiliated newspapers.

Hilley (2001) argues that since the 1980s a new media discourse emerges to satisfy an up-coming middle class. *The Star*'s communication of dissatisfaction with the handling of the issue is expressed "within the acceptable boundaries of 'democratic participation'" (Hilley, 2001: 128). With that, *The Star* cannot only accommodate its educated middle-class readership, which pushes for more democratic public spaces, but the government can also display a heterogeneous debate and increase its democratic legitimacy. Hilley calls that a "managed 'media debate', helping to keep dissent distanced from any meaningful critique of the power structure" (Hilley, 2001: 13). At the same time, *Utusan Malaysia* has to accommodate a conservative Malay readership whose dissatisfaction is expressed in its vocal rejection of the usage of the word *Allah* by non-Muslims. In the words of Harold Crouch (1996) it could be said that the Malaysian print media reflects a repressive-responsive regime that allows a certain kind of coverage to respond to the need for different opinions in this heterogeneous society.

Though biased coverage itself is not a criterion for a corrupt system of mass media, we see that the two analysed print newspapers create schemes of observation not in order to create a socially shared reality. Their realities rather function as preparations of collectively binding decisions; they offer schemes of observation that leave no alternative to the position of the respective party while at the same time create an environment that is fully supportive of the respective party's position. Opposition parties that are in direct competition with the affiliated parties are either represented as "unelectable", as in *Utusan Malaysia*, or simply ignored and not part of the created reality, as it is the case with *The Star* and its omission of DAP. Under these conditions there would be no real chance for an opposition to switch to government, since the created realities would be very unfavourable towards the opposition.

Cherian George (2006) observes for the Malaysian and Singaporean case that only a diverse media system with different institutional and editorial approaches can serve the complexity of democratic political systems. When looking at the two print papers we can indeed see two different, even dissenting editorial approaches that result in very diverse schemes of observation even though they still follow the political agenda of the respective parties. However, access to the different, even dissenting schemes of observation still offers a – despite being utterly supportive of the ruling coalition – broad picture of the debate over "*kalimah Allah*". But *Utusan Malaysia* and *The Star* are published in

two different languages. Hence, not everyone who is interested in reading both papers has the capacity to do so. Though there are always newspapers that cater to a certain audience and have certain political preferences in Malaysia it seems to be closely connected to language, and therewith ethnicity. In the Malaysian case, it is not only about creating different realities, but it becomes a question of accessibility, too. In this multilingual context many accounts to public opinion are not only heavily biased, but also only selectively accessible to the audience through different languages. Diversity alone cannot be the measurement in a nation like Malaysia. Rather, this diversity has to be accessible to the audience regardless of their language skills in order to develop an individual opinion that can draw from different inputs to evaluate the political system.

An important contribution, which *MalaysiaKini* makes to the Malaysian media landscape is that it offers dissenting schemes of observation on the "*Allah* issue" within one language and one medium. Table 1 showed that it reported not only all events that were covered by either *The Star* or *Utusan Malaysia*, but also events that were not part of the reality construction of neither print paper. Hence, we can assume that their organizational routines differ. In line with its non-partisan, but nevertheless political agenda, *MalaysiaKini* positions itself in favour of the High Court's decision. Therefore, parties and individuals that support the use of the word *Allah* by non-Muslims in Malaysia are given favourable coverage, regardless of their political affiliation (George, 2006: 162–164). We can assume from *MalaysiaKini*'s media content that the paper indeed follows the code of information/non-information rather than working in the framework of government/opposition. *MalaysiaKini* as an online newspaper then offers an alternative to mainstream media in a number of ways. Firstly, it offers dissenting schemes of observation that counter the chains of argumentation that are developed by print media. Secondly, *MalaysiaKini* includes information in its creation of reality that has been omitted by all analysed print media, hence, making it possible for certain groups and parties to enter reality and be observed by an outside audience. And lastly, it creates a truly shared reality that overcomes ethnic reporting by including much information one or the other print newspaper strategically omits or distorts in one language. If we define alternative media as what John Downing characterises as an "alternative to hegemonic discourse" (cited in George, 2008: 140) and if we agree with Hilley's description of its centrality to the hegemonic discourse "to keep critical journalism within a peripheral, manageable space" (Hilley, 2001: 128), we can conclude that online journalism has the potential to exactly challenge this notion (see also Azly, 2009; George, 2008; Mustafa, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The debate over "*kalimah Allah*" served as a very good example to show the multiple layers of Malaysia's domestic politics and its interrelation with mass media. It not only touched on Malaysia's most sensitive issues of religion, language, and Malay supremacy, but also led us to observe how disputes within the ruling coalition were re-presented in this highly controlled mass media system. It showed that the relationship between Malaysia's mass media and democratisation processes are twofold. For one, mainstream media is heavily controlled and operates in order to support the government in power. Even dissenting voices within the observed print media can be seen as part of a legitimation strategy. Dissenting schemes of observation, and dissent within the ruling coalition, only become visible, when the two papers that publish in two different languages are compared. Not only is the access to these different schemes limited by language skills, but also does language heavily influence the reality that is created. We have seen that print media constantly reproduces the ethnic divide that is so important for the ruling coalition to stay in power. Independent online newspaper *MalaysiaKini* not only covers stories that are not covered in any of the print media, but more importantly, constructs one reality for all Malaysians regardless of language. This way, the Internet becomes an important medium to further encourage democratisation processes.

Harold Crouch concludes that "the communal division of Malaysian society represents an enduring obstacle to full democratisation" (Crouch, 1996: 247). In a multilingual and ethnically diverse (and eventually divided) nation as Malaysia, the concept of shared realities has yet another dimension. We have seen that the reality of a Malaysian reading an English-language newspaper is not necessarily shared by a *Bahasa Malaysia* speaking Malaysian. Drawing from other empirical studies on Malaysian mass media, it can be assumed that the reality of a Mandarin reading Malaysian differs a lot from that of someone who reads Tamil newspapers. Differences here are not a necessity for democratisation processes, but rather a dividing force. A concerned Malaysian who wrote a letter to *The Star* in reaction to 50 years of Malaysian independence in 2007 sums it up:

> […] As a citizen, I am worried about where we are heading. And it is no comfort to know that I am among many who feel the same way. The unease stems from the reality that Malaysians live in several parallel worlds, each so different from the other, we only interact as citizens in our common connecting spaces. […]
>
> (*The Star*, 30 August 2007: 47, cited in Ong, 2009: 464)

He suggests that Malaysians live in different realities. These are first and foremost constructed through mass media. This is a major obstacle for inter-ethnic relations and a major stabilising factor of the ruling coalition. While creating dissenting schemes of observation is one task mass media has to accomplish, it is most crucial in a country like Malaysia to overcome linguistic biases in the media that enforce communitarian sentiments and minimise the language bias in reporting in order to overcome ethnicised politics.

NOTES

1. The paper is based on a Master Thesis in area studies which was submitted in January 2014 at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin.
2. "*Beliau berkata, sejak beratus tahun lalu masalah itu tidak timbul dan perkembangan terbaru ini mencetuskan suasana yang harus ditangani secara bersama dan berhati-hati*" (*Utusan Malaysia*, 5 January 2010a).
3. "*Parti yang mewakili umat Islam terbesar di negara ini, UMNO akan terus mempertahan dan memperjuangkan isu berkaitan agama itu.*"
4. "[…] *selama ini tidak pernah kedengaran orang Kristian di Semenanjung Malaysia menggunakan perkataan itu apabila bercakap berkenaan 'God' dalam bahasa Melayu.*"

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