

**MEDIA CREDIBILITY AND ITS CORRELATE WITH THE POPULARITY OF THE  
RULING PARTY**

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# **MEDIA CREDIBILITY AND ITS CORRELATE WITH THE POPULARITY OF THE RULING PARTY**

## **Abstract**

Media use and credibility are important for readers who are keen to make informed decision during election time. The attention of scholars has been attracted over the past years to understand how credibility was conceptualized, measured and how it was then related to other variables of interest. The objective of this paper is to present the findings on media credibility by relating the concept to the popularity of the ruling party. The findings from these studies, ranging from the 2004 general election to the 12<sup>th</sup> general election in 2008, and a recent study in March 2012 have related media credibility to the popularity of the ruling party pre, during and post elections. Malaysia is a fast developing country that has held its elections (and by-elections) as stipulated in the Constitution since the country achieved independence from the British in 1957.

The research questions posed was on the contribution of the various forms of media on the outcome of the elections held in the country and also during other surveys on the popularity of the ruling party.

A survey was conducted among voters nation-wide (involving more than 1200 respondents selected through quota sampling) asking them on their use of media and their evaluation of credibility of the media. Media here include newspaper, television, and internet use among the voters. Respondents indicated which party they would vote for if elections were to be held “tomorrow.” Overall findings found a correlation between media credibility and popularity of the ruling party. The findings also suggest a different role being played by internet compared to the credibility of newspaper and television on the popularity of the ruling party. Findings were also reported by educational achievement.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Electronic and print media, and other sources of communication, play a vital role in disseminating information. One associates media's responsibility and accountability (Vraga et al. 2012) for providing citizens with news, political and social information as part of its role in developing democracy.

The media function as a channel for information about politics, public affairs and current events. Learning from the information increases a person's interest and knowledge of politics, and providing him substance to hold his opinion on issues.

People seek information that is truthful. The media therefore must maintain their credibility or risk losing the confidence of the audience. The basic assumption of studying credibility is that credibility influences the effects of the message it presents.

Credibility and press freedom has a close relationship. Freedom of the press is a fundamental component of the delicate system of relations among media, society and state. Freedom of the press is thus a critical element in understanding the function of media in society (Himmelboim & Limor, 2008: 235) as the system nurtures trust in the media among audience members.

Freedom of the press has been studied as an integral part of relations between state and media in society. But many other institutions play a part in controlling the role that media can play in society because besides the political influence, the financial interests of media owners could also endanger freedom of the press as owners are more interested in the profit than in the functions that media are said to play in society. Media ownership can be direct in the form of organizational control but it could also be indirect to the audience members who see the government as an institution that ultimately directs the function of media in society.

Readers would therefore want information that is truthful so that they would then on their accord be able to make informed decision during the time they exercise their rights at the ballot boxes.

## **Objective**

This paper examines the relationship between media credibility and popular votes obtained by the ruling party during elections and off elections. It is a study on media credibility as perceived, and how this is related to the level of popular votes secured by the ruling political party. The findings will explain the changing evaluation of credibility on the newspaper, television and internet from the time elections were held in 2004 up to the recent General Elections held in 2008 and to the present survey in 2012.

## **Media Credibility**

Trust is at the core of credibility. De Haan and Bardoel (2011) talk of trust in the media and said that media performance has become a pressing issue because of the decline of public trust in the media. Many studies reveal a widespread of uneasiness about information being manipulated by media and the professional journalists. To find more trustworthiness in information, people turn to the internet as a source of information (Quandt, 2012). Trust is an essentially social and communicative concept, aimed at a specific connection between two or more actors, including journalism as a profession. In pre modern societies, relevant information was shared between persons orally, and there was no need for a large infrastructure to gather, select and exchange information. But modern society being highly media dependent, demands credible information from the media.

There has been criticisms of institutionalized media that are said to produce a faked reality, or being biased and/or susceptible to the influence of third parties. This is not regarded so with the social media, as social network media are largely unchecked communication and is regarded as being more “authentic” and “real” than that of the traditional institutionalized media (Quandt, 2012: 17).

There appears to be a growing distrust of institutions, including the media, in society. Way back in 1997 Nye discussed about the media and the declining confidence in the (American) Government. According to the Spring 2011 Eurobarometer survey across the European Union, 63% placed distrust on their governments and 60% distrusted their parliaments. In some other countries, (Portugal and the UK), there was significant cynicism towards their own political institutions. Again in the Eurobarometer 2011, 53% said they tend not to trust the press and another 45% said they had no trust of television.

Media credibility has been a concern among many scholars for a number of reasons, foremost due to media as an important institution in society. People depend on the media to obtain information to make decisions and judgments. Information from the media is augmented from interpersonal sources. During crisis people are ever dependent on the media for information, seeking out the latest for their own behavioral intent. Studies during elections illustrate the dependence of voters on the media to make choice in the selection of candidates or parties with the addition of interpersonal sources of information.

People’s dependence on the media are conditional, and one of the conditions being the trust they have on the media. If media sources are perceived to be spreading untruths, then people’s trust in the media would gradually fall and they would withdraw from seeking information from the media. Hence media owners and practitioners are conscious of the audience

judgment on their performance. Trust can be obtained on a number of platform, one being the believability people have on the media and, the second is the assessment they make of reports contained in the media.

People often times differentiate between media forms. It has been debated whether people trust the newspapers more than television. Results of studies over the past two decades have been mixed, with some studies suggesting people having more trust in television while other studies have given evidence that people trust the newspapers (Kiousis, 2001). Bucy (2003) found the young perceive credibility of Internet and television more than the older respondents. Credibility assigned to a medium is not uniform being dependent on the users preference and use of the medium (Severin & Tankard, 2001).

Maier (2004) indicated that since 1985, believability of the daily newspaper had fallen by a quarter, from 80% in 1985 to 59 % in 2002 based on a summary of readings, including data gathered by Pew Research Center. The study also pointed out that there had been a rapid decline in newspaper readership since the 1980s, with slightly more than half of Americans reading a newspaper during the week. Indeed, the three television network news divisions and local news also saw significant drops from 1985, when they were all above 80 % for believability.

Another area of studying credibility of media is now focused on the Internet. Studies on the credibility of the Internet have been considered significant as more people seek information from it (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). And in some countries, use of the Internet exceeds television use. A concept was introduced called “webelievability” as the degree to which people judge online information as credible (Johnson and Kaye, 2002:619). Reliance on the traditional media was also found to have made people to have credibility of online credibility (Johnson and Kaye, 2002). Hence people who made use of the traditional media for the daily use were in a

better position to evaluate the credibility of the Internet, with respondents saying that there were hardly any checking made on claims on the Internet. Another study placed the situation differently with people having more trust on the Internet than on television (Kiouisis, 2001). The web users have more trust on their favourite medium than their trust of the traditional media (Bucy, 2003).

In Malaysia, not many studies have been conducted on how people perceive the credibility of the media (Oorjitam, 2011). In the 1970s, Grenfell once noted that if Malaysians did not believe the electronic media, they would switch off their television sets. There was hardly any continuation done after the study. Hardly studies exist in other developing countries for comparisons to be made. A pertinent concern is the relationship of media and Internet use with elections that forms the relevance of this paper. This relationship is pertinent given the discussion that media are used for information for citizens to make reasoned decision during elections.

### **Constituents of Credibility**

What constitutes credibility? Past studies have claimed that credibility of a medium is strongly linked to the daily use of the medium (Johnson and Kaye, 2002). The more audience members used a particular medium the more likely they would deem the medium to be credible. Studies have found credibility to be contextual and situational (Vraga, et al. 2012) while others have indicated other factors like ownership to influence credibility (Andaleeb et al. 2012).

The findings by Johnson and Kaye (2002) added to the reservoir of knowledge when they found that users of traditional media were the best predictors of online credibility rather than demographics or other variables. Earlier studies have found age to be a good predictor of

credibility, that the younger group would have more trust on the media than their elders ( Bucy, 2003).

There are various indicators of media credibility. Some studies have used five indicators: how factual a medium is, the extent to which it is motivated by money, whether it invades people's privacy, what is its concern for the community and whether it can be trusted (Kiousis, 2001; Johnson and Kaye, 1998; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). Bucy (2003) operationalized credibility of the medium to mean believable, fair, accurate, informative, and in-depth, measured using a 7-point scale (1=not at all, 7=very). Flanagin and Metzger (2000) used five dimensions for their Internet information credibility study, namely believability, accuracy, trustworthiness, bias and completeness while others have used trust, dependability and credibility itself were used to measure the constructs of credibility (Andaleeb, et al. 2012).

This study used a single item, trust, to measure credibility of media. Respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which they agree on a statement that the respective media were trustworthy on a four point scale 1 being not very trustworthy and 4 being very trustworthy. The media asked were on the use of newspapers, television and the internet. In the 2008 study we used two other dimensions namely whether the media were fair and balanced in their coverage of political news.

We also asked respondents their preferred party if elections were "to be held tomorrow". Elections are for citizens to express and to exercise their rights in installing their own form of government.

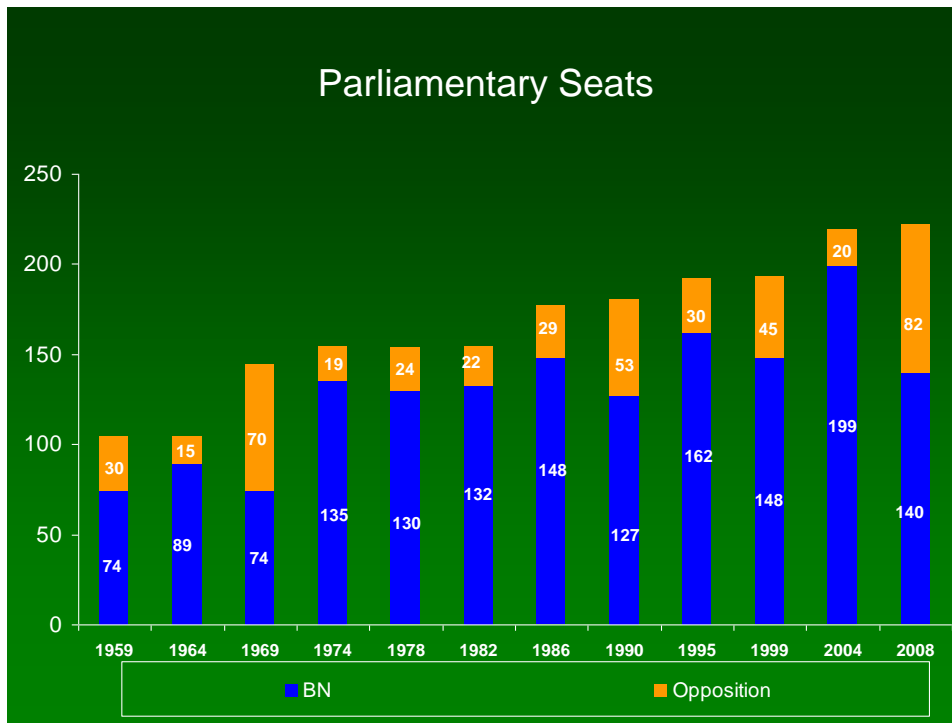
Malaysians have been going to the polls since elections were first held in 1959, with the most recent, the 12<sup>th</sup> elections, being held in 2008. Many books have been written on Malaysian politics, elections and by-elections (Ratnam, 1965; Means, 1991; Gomez & Jomo, 1997; Hwang,



2003; Idid, 2011) stressing communalism, issues, leadership and parties to being dominant over the years.

The number of parliamentary seats won by the ruling party and the opposition parties has varied over the years (See Figure 1). The ruling party scored the worst when they lost their two thirds parliamentary majority in the 2008 elections and secured only 51 percent of the popular vote but in other elections they had maintained the two-thirds majority of Parliamentary seats. Barisan Nasional (National Front) has been in power since independence from the British was achieved in 1957.

**Figure 1: Parliamentary Seats**



## **Media and Elections**

This study would relate voter perception of media credibility with the elections results from the study conducted in 2004 on the 11<sup>th</sup> General Elections to the elections held in 2008 and other studies in 2009 to 2012. A correlational analysis was made between popular votes and evaluation of media credibility.

It was in the 1990s when questions were raised over the question of media credibility. It was premised that media played an important role in disseminating information to enable people to make up their minds whom they should vote.

Data were also collected on the amount of media coverage given to the respective political parties during the election campaigns using the agenda setting model (Idid, 2011; Idid & Chang, 2012). Media-Agenda studies highlight the importance of media setting the agenda for the electors to consider while public opinion studies provided empirical evidence about the issues of concern to the general population (crime, environment) that are to be taken seriously by political parties if they want to win the elections.

While media credibility was measured through survey research, the amount of coverage was measured using content analysis. Indeed, the dominant media in Malaysia were strongly supportive of the ruling party, Barisan Nasional, when studies were conducted during the 1990, 1995 and 1999, 2004 and 2008 elections (Idid, 2004, 2011; Idid & Chang, 2012).

Several studies have found media influence to be mixed, in terms of the issues highlighted for the voters to consider. In the 1990 and 2004 elections, issues raised by the media were acceptable to some sectors of the population but in the 2008 elections, media issues were related only among the Chinese but not among Malays and Indians (Idid, 2011; Idid & Chang, 2012).

Malaysians mainly watch television and read the newspapers daily but few listen to the radio. Internet use is growing popular. It is a similar media scenario in many developed and developing countries where television is the favourite medium over the other media.

Malaysians are very well exposed to the electronic and printed media. Over 90% of Malaysian households have television and the majority of adult Malaysians watch television daily. In 2001, 84% of Malaysians watched television and it was 82% in 2002 (Media Guide 2003). A total of 74% and 72% of Malaysians listened to the radio in 2001 and 2003. A total of 50% and 51% read newspapers for the same period. In April 2004 the study found that 62% Malaysians watched television daily, 46% read newspapers and 24% listened to the radio every day.

According to the Media Planning Guide (2010), there is an increase in the media reach to the populace over the years, with Malays being the largest viewers of TV programs. Regardless of the language, the channel that is the most popular is TV3, followed by TV2 and TV 1. TV coverage among adult viewers are increasing from 91% (2004), 92% (2005), 93% (2006 and 2007) and reaching 94% by 2008.

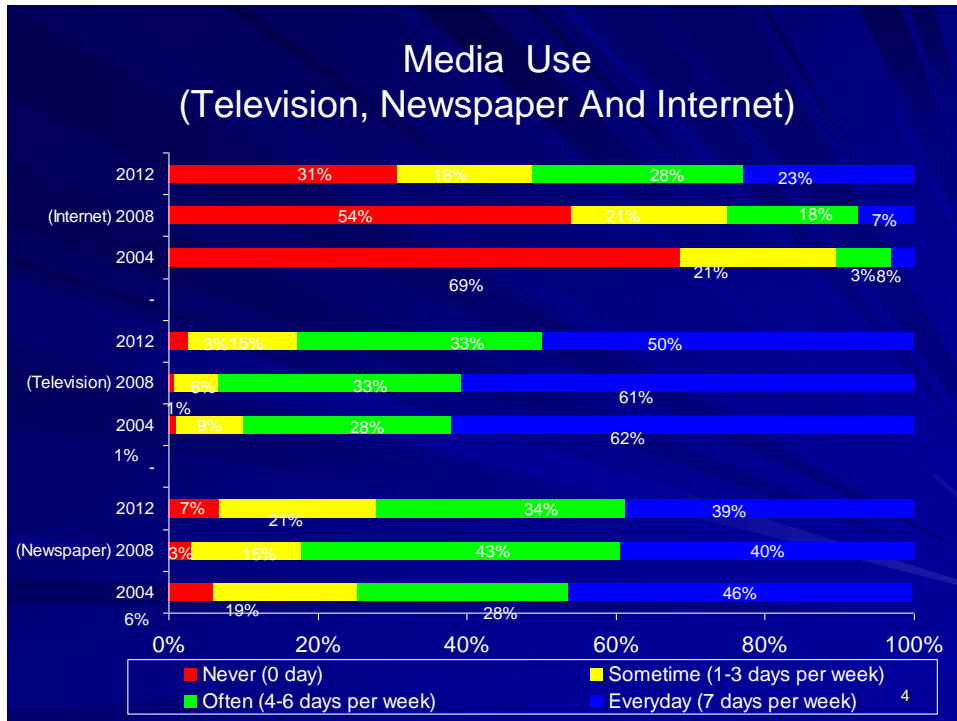
Newspapers reach only 50% of the population. Malay readership is highest among the different newspapers (46%), followed by Chinese papers (31%), English papers (19%), and Tamil papers (4%). The newspaper coverage among adults increased from 52% (2004) to 55% in 2005 and remained almost consistent for 2006 with 54% while in 2007 it was 55% and returning to 54% in 2008.

Media use varies across the race, depending on the type of media used. According to NMR Media Index 2006 (Media Planning Guide, 2007), based on a sample of 13,428,00 people surveyed, 97% watched television and 55% read newspapers. Among the women, it was found

that adolescents (15-24 years old) were great users of the Internet while young adults (25-39 years old) were users of TV and also the Internet. Adults (40 years old and older) were the main users of the newspapers meaning that women’s media use was associated with the appropriate information and news relevant for their daily use (Saodah Wok, 2009).

Our study showed an increase on voter use of television, newspaper and Internet over the years. In 2004, 69% did not use the Internet, but in 2012, this figure dropped to 31%, with another 23% using the Internet everyday compared to only 8% who made use of the Internet daily in 2004.

**Figure 2: Media Use**



Everyday use of television declined from 62% in 2004 to 50% in 2012. It was a similar trend for the use of newspapers. In 2004, 46% read the newspapers everyday but in 2012, only 39% did so. What the figures suggest is that Malaysian voters are using the Internet more than they are using the traditional media channels. Malaysians are also using the on-line newspapers more than reading the printed media.

The use of Internet among Malaysians also showed an increase. Internet was introduced to Malaysia in 1995. Referring to Table 1, Internet penetration throughout the country has increased over the years from 15% in 2000 to more than 60% from 2008 through 2010. There was an increase in the Internet coverage from 2004 through 2008 with 12%, 14%, 15%, 18% and 21%, respectively (Media Planning Guide, 2010).

**Table 1: Internet Usage and Population Growth**

Year	Users	Population	% Penetration.
2000	3,700,000	24,645,600	15.0 %
2005	10,040,000	26,500,699	37.9 %
2006	11,016,000	28,294,120	38.9 %
2007	13,528,200	28,294,120	47.8 %
2008	15,868,000	25,274,133	62.8 %
2009	16,902,600	25,715,819	65.7 %
2010	16,902,600	26,160,256	64.6 %

Internet users spent an average of 9 hours per week on the net, mainly at home especially at night. More than two-thirds of the Internet users used less than 8 hours per week. Most of the Internet users are school children and students (37%) and those within the age group of 20-29 years old (30%), the working group.

Apart from the issues discussed, the issue of media credibility is also pertinent. Electoral process and media coverage complement each other. However, the credibility of the media in disseminating information and in acting as sources of information about the elections has been the issue discussed.

## **Methodology**

Respondents who were registered voters aged 21 and above were selected through quota sampling to cater for the spread of race, age and geography.

The respondents were interviewed face to face; each interview lasting about 30 to 40 minutes. Questions were asked ranging from their perception of party, candidates, intention to vote, media use, types of media used, and credibility of media.

The respondents were asked how trustworthy they perceived of the mainstream newspapers, television and Internet, based on a four-point scale. However, this report considers low credibility and high credibility by posing the question as whether the media can be trusted or not. The scale of 1 indicates “Not very trustworthy” and 2 indicates “ Not trustworthy” are classified as No credibility while 3 indicating “trustworthy” and 4 indicating “Very Trustworthy” are combined to form Credibility. For the purpose of this presentation we would present media credibility by combining “Trustworthy” and “Very Trustworthy.”

The respondents were surveyed a week before the elections in 2004 and after the 12<sup>th</sup> General Elections in 2008. We also conducted studies in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 which we duly report.

We asked respondents during the time of elections which party they had voted and during off elections we would ask “if elections were to be held tomorrow, which party would you choose.” Various party names were given and each respondent could choose only one party.

When we started the study in 1990, Internet was hardly known. Internet use first appeared in the 1999 elections. In 1990, the National Front or BN, the ruling party was 53% popular with 89% and 87% of voters saying television and newspapers to be credible. The ruling party, the National Front, took home 127 seats and the opposition secured 53 parliamentary seats.

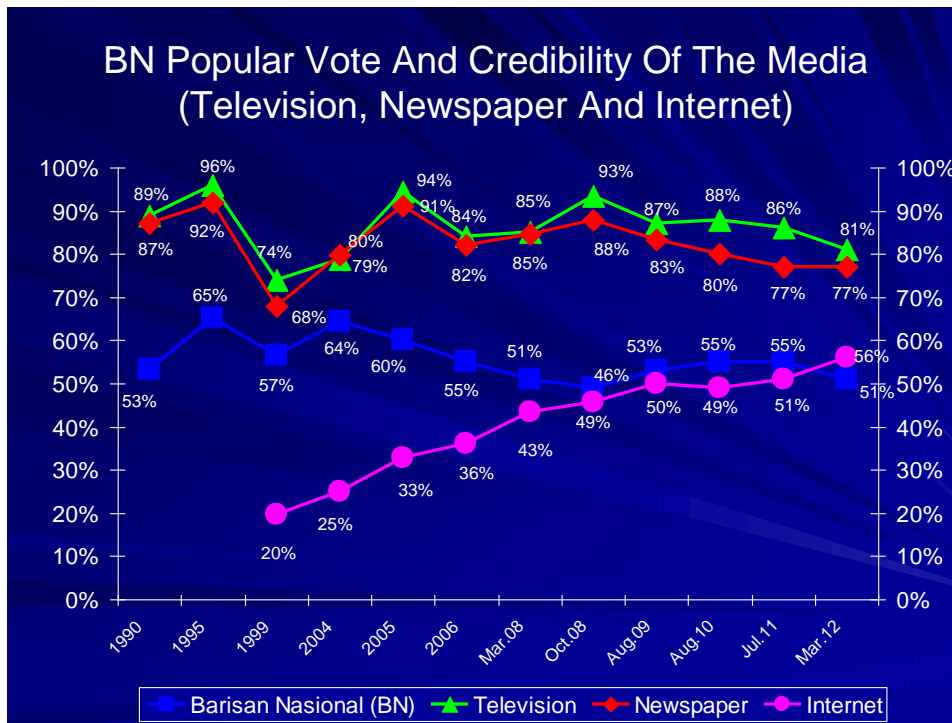
The 1999 elections results was said to be a change in the Malaysian political landscape with the ruling party obtaining 148 seats, one of the lowest in the electoral history. Its low popularity also saw a low score in newspaper and television credibility. It was for the first time that blogging came into the picture and political parties began to use the computers. Voters were acquainted with possible access to additional information besides the information they obtained from the traditional media.

The 2004 election was the best achievement by Barisan Nasional as it gained 90% of seats in Parliament. Four years later, at the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election in 2008, the ruling party Barisan Nasional scored one of its worst results when its popularity dipped to 51% and, for the first time in Malaysian history, the ruling party lost its two thirds majority strength in Parliament. Media credibility was recorded to be low, the trust in newspapers and the television was rated at 85%. The Internet was no more regarded as an additional source of information but was taken to be an alternative source of information as Malaysians trust in the Internet increased.

Further studies after the General Elections showed that the credibility of newspaper and television dipped from 2008 to July 2011 (85% and 77%) and in March 2012, 81% of Malaysians said they trusted the television and 77% said they trusted newspapers. These results need to be seen in tandem with the ruling party's popularity that stood at 51% during the 12 General Elections of March 2008 and 51% in March 2012. In March 2008, the Internet credibility was 43% but in March 2012, Internet credibility stood at 56%, suggesting an increased trust in the Internet and a growing distrust of the newspapers and television.

The decline in the trust toward the traditional media is a reversal of the trust of voters toward the Internet. There has been a steady increase in voter trust in the Internet suggesting that when the credibility of the traditional media is low, there is a higher Internet credibility.

**Figure 3: Media Credibility and Popular Vote for the Ruling Party**





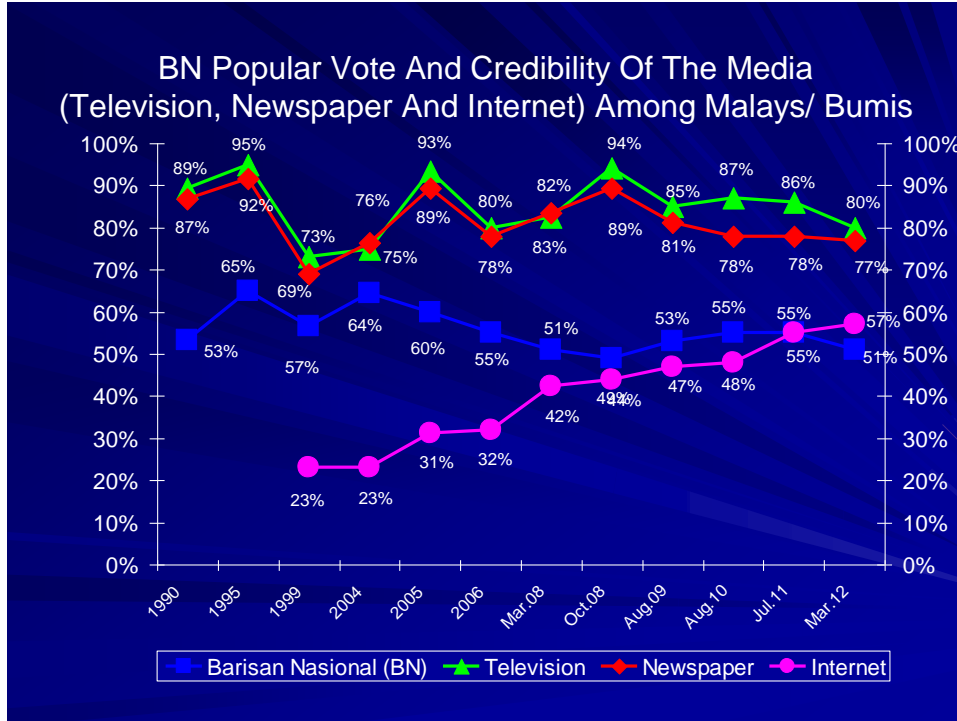
## **Analysis by Ethnicity**

In multi-racial Malaysia, parties are communal based. But the parties formed a coalition to win over the support from the other races. For example Barisan Nasional, the ruling party, has 14 component parties, representing various ethnic groups in the country. During the elections they would use one banner prominently displaying the National Front flag but at the side of the banner would be shown the flag of the component party.

The opposition parties have a loose coalition, not as formalized as the National Front. At the 2008 General Elections, the opposition parties had decided for the first time to field only one candidate per constituency against the candidate fielded by the National Front. This direct competition has contributed significantly to the loss of parliamentary seats once held by the National Front.

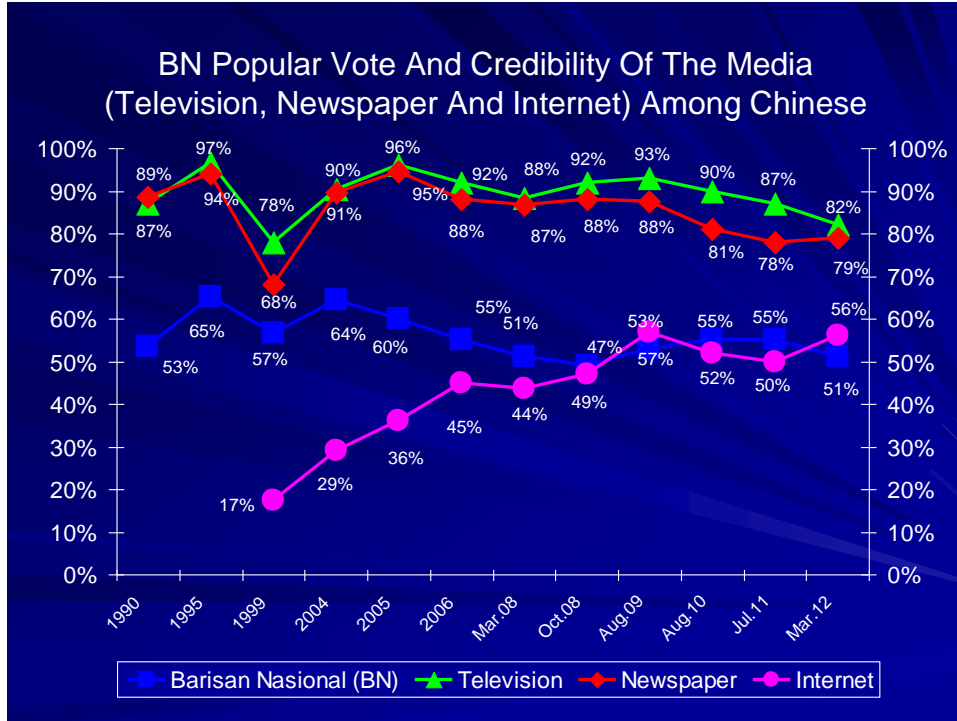
Analysis by race of voters showed a similar scenario to the general population. There was a similar trend recorded for the Malays (the Malays form 58% of the total voters). In March 2008, Malay credibility on the newspaper was recorded at 83% and on TV at 82% but it was 77% and 80% in March 2012, a drop of six points and two points respectively. The Malay's trust on Internet had gone from 42% in March 2008 to 57% in 2012, an increase of 15 points.

**Figure 4: Media Credibility among the Malays**



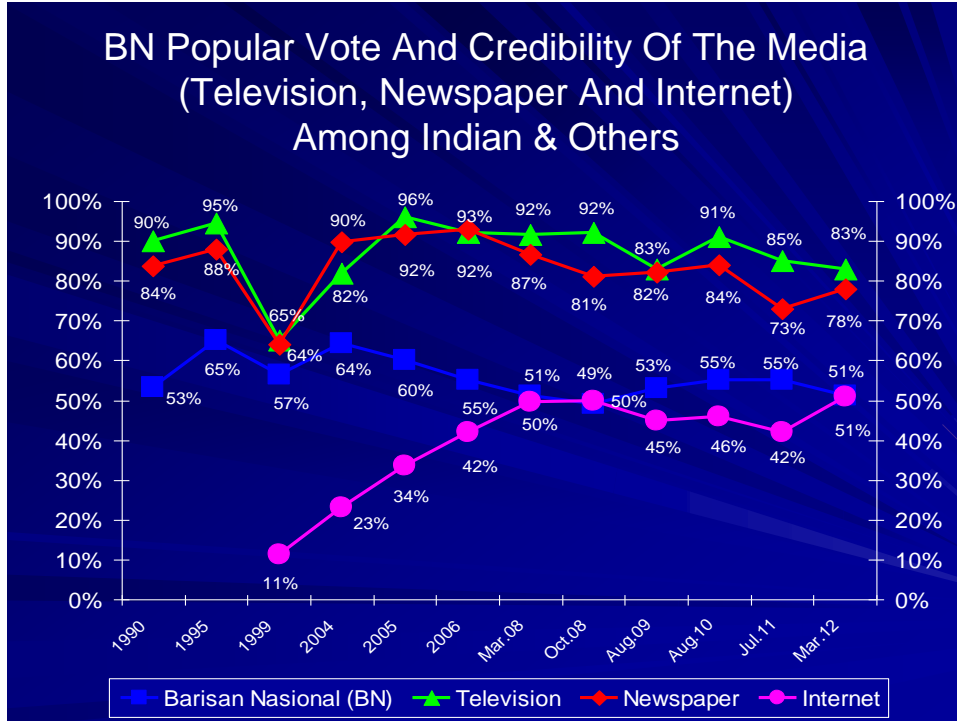
For the Chinese voters, the study suggested a downward trend with the credibility of the newspapers dropping from 87% in March 2008 to 79% in March 2012, and likewise for the same period for TV dropping from 88% to 82%, a drop of eight points for newspapers and six points for television. The credibility of the Internet showed an increase from 44% in 2008 to 56% in March 2012 an increase of 12 points.

**Figure 5: Media Credibility among the Chinese**



The Indian drop in trusting the mainstream media was more spectacular. The 87% credibility on newspaper in 2008 was down to 78% in March 2012, and the 92% credibility of television in 2008 declined to 83% in March 2012, a drop of 9 points for each medium. Credibility of the Internet grew from 50% to 51% in March 2012, just a one point increase.

**Figure 6: Media Credibility among the Indians**

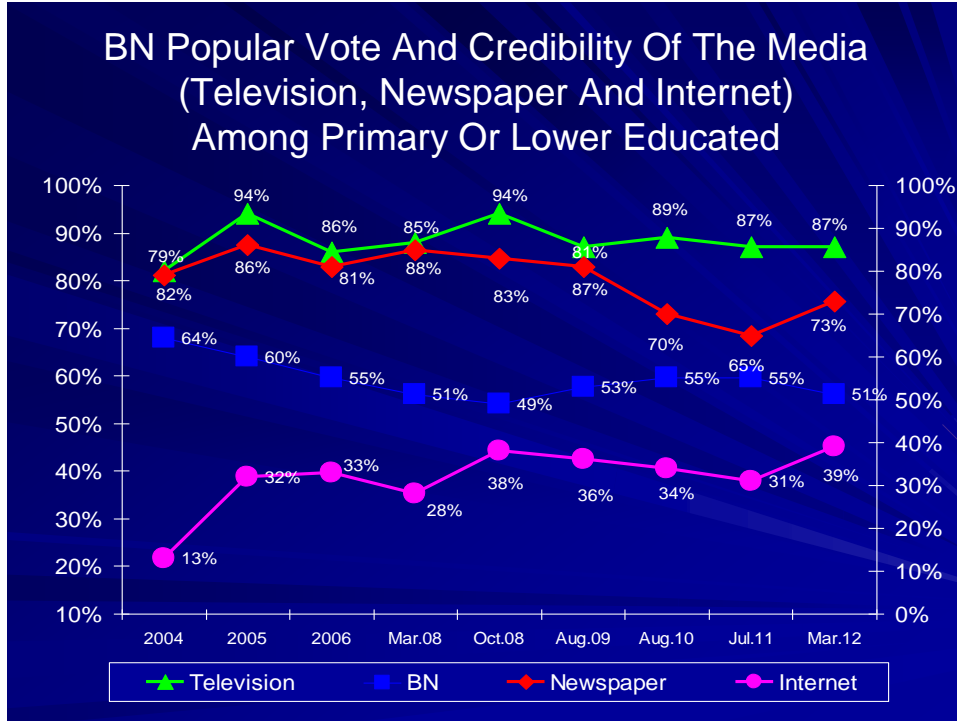


### Analysis by Education

The study made an analysis by educational levels to understand how education affected voters perception of credibility. We divided education into three groups; the lower or primary educated to be voters who had less than six years of education; Secondary Education to be those who had seven years of education and those without degrees, and the Higher Educated are those with degrees.

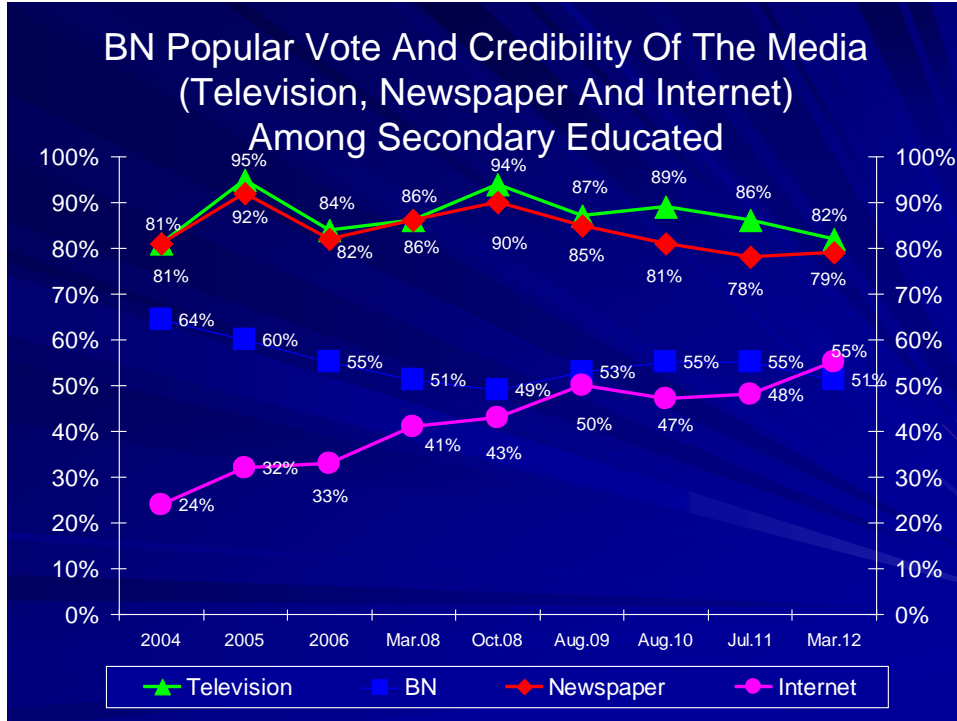
Among the primary educated, there was a fall of 12 points for trust in newspapers and one point for television from 2008 to 2012. There was an increase of 10 points from a 28% of those who trusted the Internet to 39% in 2012. It is to be noticed that the use of the Internet is lowest among the primary educated compared to the other categories of educated voters.

**Figure 7: Media Credibility among the Primary Educated Voters**



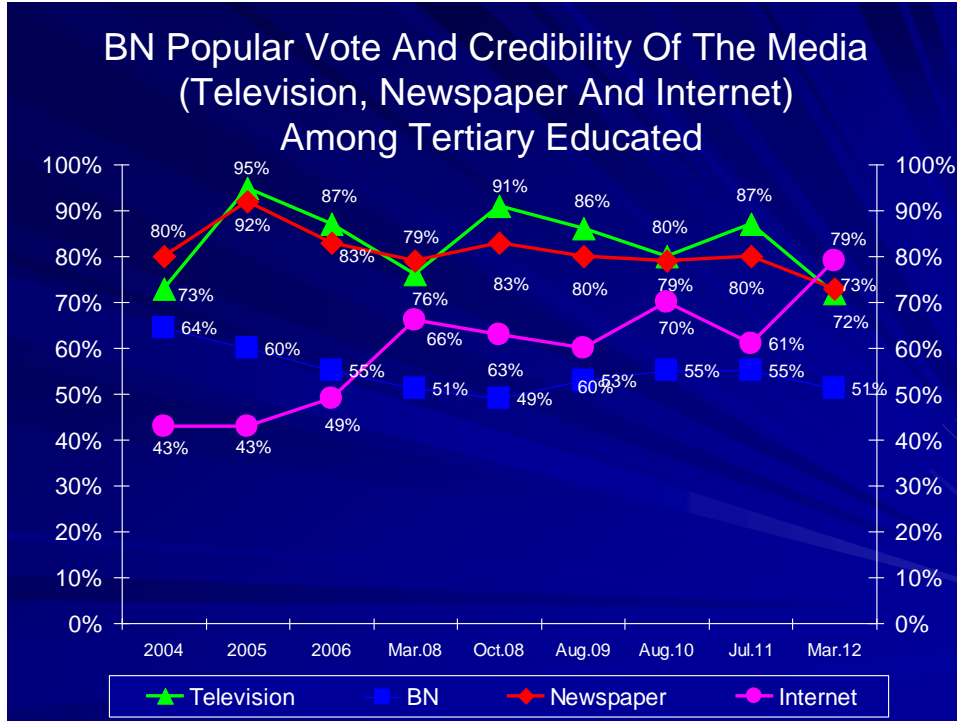
Among the Secondary Educated voters, there was a drop of seven points in trusting the newspapers, with 86% trusting newspapers in 2008 compared to 79% in 2012. There was a four point drop in television credibility. There was however, a big increase of 14 points in trusting Internet, from 41% in 2008 to 55% to 2012.

**Figure 8: Media Credibility among the Secondary Educated Voters**



Among the tertiary educated voters, the drop in trusting newspapers was six points, from 79% in 2008 to 73% in 2012. There was a 76% trust in television in 2008 and it dropped to 72% in 2012. The increase in trusting the Internet was 13 points, 66% having their trust in Internet in 2008 to 79% trust in 2012. It can be seen from Figure 9 that the credibility of newspapers and television was very low in March 2008 but the tertiary educated perceived the Internet to be high (66%) in March 2008. In March 2012 their trust in the Internet (79%) exceeded their trust in the traditional media (newspapers at 73% and television at 72%).

**Figure 9: Media Credibility among the Tertiary Educated Voters**



**General Analysis**

The global scenario is not favourable to trust in institutions, such as government agencies, parliament, even the media. There is public mistrust on these institutions. The effect of negativism is increased cynicism and a disbelief on these institutions. The traditional media once had near monopoly in disseminating information to the general public, and when the internet was introduced in the 1990s it provided added information to that supplied by the traditional media. By the 2000s, the internet became an alternative to the traditional media. Voters did not have to depend on the traditional media for information, but instead can solicit for themselves information that they want from the internet. The home of the professional journalists in the newspaper organizations is giving way to the civil journalists who work at home and in the office who perform the duty of journalism with equal zeal.

There are other view points besides this videomalaisie that media's negativity and lack of substance lead to a growing mistrust in government (Avery, 2009). Others propose a "virtuous circle" citing variety of media sources and access that would create public trust. The study by Avery (2009) suggest that greater media exposure increases trust only among those already trusting the government who rely on newspapers for their political news but those exposed to television have a mistrust of the government because of the negative coverage given to politics by the medium. Avery's statement is given in an American context when the media is relatively free from government control. But when media are influenced by government policy, the audience members are aware of this and discern between news that is credible and that which is not.

In our study, it is indicated that there is a pattern that when the credibility of newspapers and television showed a decline there was also a decline in the popularity of votes obtained by the ruling party. There is also a rising pattern in the use of Internet use and the trust voters have on the use of the Internet. Trust in the Internet is best reflected when analysis is made by education. There was a 11 point, 10 point and 10 point increase among the primary, secondary and tertiary educated voters in their trust of the Internet while there was a decline in their trust of the newspapers and television.

The relationship between mistrust of the media and the popularity of the ruling party is best reflected in what voters perceive of the media. Discussions have been made on credibility of source, medium (channel) and messages. But voters could also perceived the media as an institution that is under the perceived control of the ruling party. Credibility could be one that the audience make of the media as one of the social institutions in society. To the audience, in this case the voters, credibility moves with the period. When they have more faith in the ruling party



they have more trust in the newspapers and television which are at best perceived by them to be influenced or controlled by the ruling party. It is therefore a manifestation of trust they have of the ruling political party that is manifested when they were asked to rate their trust of the two media.

Credibility has brought in the nature of media messages, touching on believability. In a society where media are controlled by the government, the political parties or by the financial interests, people realise the direction of the news, but many still find them useful to obtain news or information. In a tight environment where there is a need for information, audience members direct their attention to extract information from an environment of skepticism. Those applying a skeptical attitude exhibits a discriminating position towards the news media (Pinkleton et al, 2012). They seek, obtain information but they are little influenced by the slant of the news portrayed.

Trust in the Internet is somewhat different as Internet is more free and there is no perception of control by the government or the ruling party. The freeness of the Internet allows the floating of ideas, some of them maybe rubbish, but through the rubble and rumble of ideas in the numerous sites, voters would be able to discern for themselves the issues that they perceive to be true. Hence their trust in the internet as more issues are deliberated that would enable them to select and hence decide for themselves. Rather than be told by the traditional media, the voters are able to listen to the Internet.

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