

Abuse of power by the media

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak flew in for his official visit in July, a storm was raging in Britain over the phone-hacking scandal involving the News of the World owned by Rupert Murdoch's powerful News Corp. Indeed, it caused British Prime minister David Cameron to reschedule an appointment with Najib as he had to answer questions in Parliament, which led to false reports, particularly in cyberspace, that Cameron had snubbed Najib.

It was also widely reported and concluded on the Internet that Queen Elizabeth II was making a point when she wore yellow when receiving Najib and his wife at Buckingham Palace, the point, of course, being, that she sympathised with the Bersih rally that had occurred the weekend before Najib left Malaysia. Never mind that the Queen is above politics and extremely unlikely to want to interfere in the internal affairs of another country when she is receiving its dignitary. She could have had the audience cancelled if she had felt so strongly. The truth is, yellow has been her favoured colour lately. She was at Royal Ascot in a light lemon dress, and it could hardly be that she would want to show support for Bersih 2.0 at Ascot!

Is it next going to be put about that any member of Malay royalty is in sympathy with Bersih when he or she wears yellow, overwhelmingly the royal colour in Malaysia? Bersih may have inadvertently been onto something here!

The Malaysian mainstream media, however, blacked out the issue of the Queen being dressed in yellow, just as it did the false assertion of a snub by Cameron, and avoided any mention of the 30 or so stragglers demonstrating for Bersih outside Mansion House when Najib met the Lord Mayor of London.



On the other hand, all sorts of exaggerated reports appeared on the Internet. Instead of taking the bull by the horns and applying a little bit of intelligence to rubbish such exaggeration, the mainstream media left the big wide space to be dominated by bloggers and stragglers.

This is how the mainstream media is increasingly becoming unloved and not believed. And all the nonsense in cyberspace becomes grist for the rumour mill. Such inverted abuse of the assumed power of the media has resulted in further abuse of it in cyberspace. The mainstream media is to blame for this and it must raise the bar to regain credibility.

Similarly, the YouTube video that reached all corners of the world dominated perception of what the police did on July 9 — ruthless, even brutal. Clearly, any such track would be selective. But I have yet to see any alternative YouTube video showing otherwise.

The hapless police did not have a good day. We are not used to demonstrations and some of them may have been water cannon and tear gas-happy. But I have heard, and there have been, isolated reports of police being restrained and caring, such as with the Pas president. If we had a director of communications, like the set-up in Downing Street, in our system who approached his job professionally, we might not be in the pickle we are in about July 9.

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The Bersih rally was a show of weakness, not strength. But the authorities accorded it the strength that made it more impactful than it should have been. A more analytical and cool-headed approach to handle a group that was looking to up the ante, supported by an intelligent and less-supine mainstream media, would have helped to limit its consequences. Coming back to Murdoch and his ilk, what the News of the World did was full frontal abuse of the media even if by covert means. What was done in hacking into the phones of those missing and presumed dead was callous and heartless — and ruthless. What gave the editors the gumption to do what they did was their close relationship with prime ministers and those in power. While they supped with the powerful, they went after big stories on small people — and absolutely violated their rights.

The Guardian, the newspaper that primarily exposed all this, is to be commended. There will no doubt be a debate on its intention in the exposé, but one thing it cannot be accused of is specific political motive. If it had wanted Cameron to go, it could have saved all the accumulated information, come out in one fell swoop and not have pressed for Cameron's director of Communications Andy Coulson (a former News of the World editor) to be removed as early as last January.

Imagine what would have happened if Coulson (now arrested by the police) was still in office when the phone-hacking scandal all came out in July. Cameron could very well have had to resign as prime minister.

The Murdoch papers would most probably have acted differently. They would have gone for the political jugular. They make or break prime ministers and could determine election results. Why, Tony Blair reportedly spoke on the phone with Murdoch twice in the week before joining the US in the attack on Iraq in March 2003, presumably seeking his advice (and, of course, support).

How about Malaysian newspapers? Not in that league, thankfully, but let's not get complacent. One or two newspapers are worrying. One can sense veiled threats, like pulling the carpet with the party political masses from under their masters' feet — and thereby getting away with some rather scary reporting and commentary. Newspapers have no business playing politics. It would be good if instead our Malaysian mainstream media became more professional and objective. ■

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