

Between the angry man and the 'nasty woman'

BY BUNN NAGARA

The world's most publicised election offers entertainment value, but without much recommendation of the selection process.

IT is now only two weeks and two days to the US presidential election and practically, the whole planet is as clued-in on the identities of the candidates as it is clueless about their agendas.

Blame this on mainstream media more preoccupied with personalities and sensationalism than the issues and prospective policies. There are four broad areas to consider.

At a superficial level, everyone is supposed to be aware of the policy objectives of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. But what are presumed to be known are often illusory and misleading, thanks to the media's myth-making and mystification.

A major scandal surrounds Clinton's careless use of unsecured email for sensitive and even classified information. But according to Washington insiders, other US senior officials routinely do so out of habit.

While that does not excuse a presidential candidate for doing so, the real issues are given scant attention by the media. These include Clinton's repeated lying and evasion, and obstructing investigations and thus also justice into influence peddling for money tied to the Clinton Foundation.

As the outsider, Trump has to endure a greater degree of media scrutiny and opprobrium. Much has been aired about his crude rhetoric, past indiscretions and the pledge to build a wall along the southern border with Mexican money.

Yet, in the debates and speeches, he has shown an ability to dial back on outrageous remarks made earlier, as well as flexibility on something as supposedly implacable as a wall.

His liaisons with women may be no more deplorable than Bill Clinton's, not that any mainstream media outlet would acknowledge it.

On another level, each candidate's apparent pros and cons that are supposed to be their strengths and weaknesses are not so apparent after all. Much depends on how they are spun.

Clinton wants to increase taxes, doubling down on the Democratic Party's style of taxing the rich more as laid down by Obama. When current tax rates are seen as high already, this means more of the same.

It does not sound promising when in the time since Obama's first year in office, poverty rose by 8.9% according to the latest government figures.

However, higher public revenues generated by more taxes would be able to fund more social services. This approach, often criticised by opponents as "tax and spend" by public authorities, has come to be a norm in developed industrial societies.

Trump's approach is to lower taxes on companies to stop them from relocating production abroad, and even to bring back corporate funds parked overseas. But opponents criticise it for simply benefitting the rich.

However, the plan behind lowered corporate taxes has more to it than the media has generally conceded. Analysts say that US companies have at least US\$2 trillion (RM8.4 trillion) sitting overseas avoiding the high taxes at home.

If corporate tax were lowered to 10%, an additional US\$200bil (RM840bil) could return to re-invest at home, provide more jobs and energise the economy.

Trump adviser Dr Ben Carson says this could be achieved without more government spending.

For Clinton, increased government expenditure would also continue to fund state-sponsored healthcare, either in retaining Obamacare or tweaking it into a successor system. But it is an approach universally facing mounting challenges.

The Democrats' more welfare-oriented, social democratic style approaches European norms, but therein lie both the aspiration and the problem. Countries like Sweden have found generous state expenditures unsustainable, and as the problem bites deeper in Europe, so have more countries there.

For Trump, the urgent need to create more jobs instead of exporting them is linked with inner-city redevelopment. Urban renewal connects with the pressing need for refurbishing public infrastructure.

Like foreign visitors and local residents, Trump and his advisers seem more aware of the need to repair and rebuild infrastructure than Clinton. It would be crass to suggest that his concern comes only from self-interest as a property developer, while denying his occupation affords insights into the national problem.

The Trump campaign wants to allocate a substantial sum generated from the repatriated US\$2 trillion currently overseas in designated "enterprise zones", to revive economically depressed urban conurbations. But this is another important policy plank that the media habitually neglects.

The third level to consider in understanding US media skewing of the issues, despite the obvious importance of the presidential campaign, is how the given media formats can work to the disadvantage of candidates.

This is where Clinton is more fortunate. Her liabilities are identified from the outset – unsecured emails, problem campaign staff – and limited airtime and column space curtail further exposure of their implications.

The limited scope afforded by news updates and bulletins works against Trump by superficially highlighting his gaffes and indiscretions. He is personally also responsible for this by generating more negatives about an already questionable persona in media portrayals.

The lack of depth for detailed analysis in the media means Trump has a limited ability to demonstrate that allegations against him have little or no basis. The same lack in the media also limits a deeper exploration of Hillary's flaws.

The standard news format, particularly in broadcasting, encourages skimming – which is presenting various allegations or controversies with little time or space for investigating them. Trump's particular weakness is in allowing himself to be so depicted.

Clinton tends to come away looking better in the media because of her fewer, if deeper or more serious, flaws. Even in studio discussions and interviews, the negatives of each candidate are tightly packed between other aspects of their campaigns.

The fourth level concerns the various mistaken assumptions being made.

Since Trump has television experience in his reality show *The Apprentice*, it is said that he has the edge over Clinton in media presentations. Not quite, or rather not at all.

On his own show he is the all-pervasive boss, from the narrative of the programme to the outcome of each episode and not least in his status relative to the hopeful would-be apprentices.

This is not the case in the series of televised debates, run on rules not laid out by any of the candidates. And in mainstream news reports by networks or publications set against him, or aligned with Clinton, Trump loses again.

Another erroneous assumption lies in the denial that the mainstream media has a bias against Trump. How can Establishment media fail to sideline or do worse to an anti-Establishment figure?

Clinton as the exemplar of the Establishment has the mainstream edge over Trump, as she had over Bernie Sanders before. A content analysis of media portrayals and interview questions, even a simple head count of studio guests and their views, makes that clear.

The error by those who insist Trump must lose come Nov 8 assumes that the vast majority of women and ethnic minorities will not support him. That argument forgets that it is not a presumed constituency that matters, but the people – usually those more emotionally motivated – who actually bother to vote.

Yet another error is widely committed by most people who are Trump critics but not US citizens living in the US: assuming that the better candidate for the US must also be the better one for the rest of the world.

Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.