

**Nota Penyelidikan/Research Note**

## Newspapers and Politics in 2006 Elections in Sarawak

### Surat Khabar dan Politik dalam Pilihanraya Sarawak 2006

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#### ABSTRAK

*Surat khabar mempunyai impak yang tinggi terhadap cara manusia melihat dunia mereka dan cara mereka membuat keputusan. Keputusan politik yang mereka buat akan dibentuk oleh apa yang mereka baca melalui surat khabar. Surat khabar biasanya mempunyai agendanya yang tersendiri mengenai berita yang hendak disampaikan kepada orang awam. Hal ini adalah untuk menarik perhatian umum. Namun, di Malaysia, surat khabar harus mengetahui apa yang kerajaan mahu mereka terbitkan oleh kerana kalau tidak kemungkinan mereka akan menghadapi risiko seperti pembatalan, pemberhentian dan penggantungan permit tahunan penerbitannya. Oleh yang demikian, surat khabar di Malaysia secara amnya akan memberikan lebih liputan kepada Barisan Nasional (BN) yang telah memerintah negara ini semenjak kemerdekaan pada 1957 dan komponen-komponen partinya terutama sekali kepada Persatuan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu (UMNO), Persatuan Cina Malaysia (MCA) di peringkat nasional, dan Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) dan Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sarawak (SUPP) di negeri Sarawak, berbanding liputan yang diberi kepada parti-parti pembangkang. Liputan tersebut bukan hanya pro-BN tetapi adalah sangat berat sebelah sampai pembangkang dan ramai penganalisis mengatakan surat khabar di Malaysia bersalah kerana mengamalkan sikap serong atau bias kerana memberikan tumpuan kepada berita pemerintah dan aktiviti-aktiviti yang dianjurkan oleh kerajaan. Adakah tuduhan ini betul? Satu cara untuk menjawab soalan tersebut adalah dengan melihat dan membandingkan cara-cara dua naskah surat khabar bahasa Inggeris di Sarawak iaitu The Borneo Post dan Eastern Times semasa membuat liputan tentang pilihan raya Negeri Sarawak yang kesembilan yang diadakan pada 10-20 Mei 2006.*

*Kata kunci: Politik, pilihan raya, liputan akhbar, serong, pro-BN*

## ABSTRACT

*Newspapers have tremendous impact on how people perceive their world and on how they make decisions. The political decisions the people make could be shaped a lot by what they read in the newspaper. Newspapers often have their own private agenda on what news they are going to communicate to the general public to attract their attention. In Malaysia, however, the newspapers must also know what the government wants them to publish; otherwise they risk their annual permits being revoked, terminated or suspended. As a consequence, mainstream newspapers in Malaysia in general give more coverage to the National Front or the Barisan Nasional (BN) which has governed the country since independence in 1957 and to its component parties especially the United Malay National Organisations (UMNO) and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) at the national level, and the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) and the Sarawak United Peoples Party (SUPP) in the State of Sarawak than they do to the oppositions. The coverage is not only pro-BN, but it is so lopsided that the oppositions and many analysts alike often accused newspapers in the country guilty of extreme bias as they mainly cover news on the government and government related activities. Is this accusation accurate? Are newspapers in the country pro-government? One way to find out if this is so is to see how the two mainstream English newspapers in Sarawak, namely The Borneo Post and the Eastern Times, covered the Ninth Sarawak State Election which was held on 10-20 May 2006.*

*Keywords: Politics, election, newspaper coverage, bias, pro-BN*

## INTRODUCTION

Politics involves making decision on who gets what and when, and on how resources and people are organised. The decisions made on the uses and allocations of resources do not favour everyone at any one particular point in time. Decision-making often creates political winners and losers. Because of this there must exist a mechanism which can be used to persuade the people to accept the decisions and the decision-making processes. This mechanism is the mass media, and newspapers are one of the main media for doing this.

Elections are fundamental to democratic process. Elections may be considered as both review process and preview processes whereby the public will use the opportunity to assess past performance of the government and decide its future directions. In elections the role of the press becomes more striking and prominent (Alger 1989: 185). In Western liberal democracies in particular, election campaign is regarded as media spectacle, where image can be more important than issue, and personalities also become important issues (Anderson 1997: 17). Because of the important role played by the press in

promoting the individual and his party, political actors compete for favourable press attention so that what they want to say does get published. The government has advantage in this competition as the press recognises the obligation of the government to inform its citizens (Pfetsch 1998: 70).

During elections newspapers become hot item in Malaysia, and are often sold out as soon as they hit the market. The surge in demand for newspapers during elections indicates an increased interest in the types of political news communicated. During these times, those interested in 'the politics of the news' (Jamieson & Capella 1998: 110) do focus their energies analysing reporting about political campaigns. In Malaysia, a lot of people spent a lot of their time reading and discussing election/campaign/political news in the country's coffeeshops, as kind of immediate response to the news item. The new election news may reinforce their existing attitudes or give them new ideas about certain things (Anderson 1997: 24). How an individual reacts after reading the election news may affect his behaviour during polling. According to Street (2001: 86) this is true as evidenced from the study conducted by Harrop (1986) on the US and the British newspapers where he found out that the press did impact on voters' attitudes to certain issues. For the majority of the people who are not involved directly in the election campaigns, their participation in the election, albeit being a passive one, could be confined to reading and discussing political news communicated by the press. Those who buy and read the newspapers will certainly be influenced by them (Sorlin 1994: 18) as people often believe what they read (Street 2001: 83).

What is communicated as politics news and the types of actors involved are important for this article. This article, however, is not interested in the content of the news communicated in a sense that it is going to systematically classify and describe the communication content according to predetermined categories. The main thrust of this article is to study the size, in terms of square centimetre, of the news communicated by the two English dailies in Sarawak, namely *The Borneo Post* and the *Eastern Times*, of the State's Ninth General Election which was held from 10-20 May 2006, and to compare the size of news coverage on individual politicians and on the political parties involved. By analysing the size of coverage of politics news it can be known how the press disseminates information on politics and creates election news in the State of Sarawak in particular, and in the Federation of Malaysia in general.

The main objective of this article therefore is to analyse the biases of the political contents of the two mainstream English newspapers in Sarawak. The approach used in doing this is to first identify each piece of the political news communicated in the two newspapers, measure the size of the news item in terms of centimeter square, total up the sizes of the various news items in accordance to the predetermined units of analysis, and then make comparisons.

## METHODOLOGY

The common method that is used to study what has been communicated as election news in the newspapers is content analysis. Content analysis of the election news involves the analysis of the number of stories in the news on election-related subjects and of the content of those stories (Alger 1989: 192). It is a method of studying and analysing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables (Wimmer & Dominick 2000: 135; Kerlinger 1986). For example, it has been used in studying headlines, which are one of the most striking features of a newspaper (Schneider 2000: 45). This article is not interested, in the contents of the politics/election news, but in the size of the news that have been communicated.

The first step taken in analysing the size of politics news communicated by the press on the Sarawak State Ninth General Election is to decide on the time-frame for the study. The study period commenced the day after the nomination on May 10, 2006 and ended on the last day of campaign or the day before polling on May 19, 2006. The second step is to decide on what types of newspapers to study. For this purpose, *The Borneo Post* and the *Eastern Times*, the two English daily newspapers in the state, were identified. The third step is to identify the types of news that can be classified as politics news and/or elections news. The types of news coverage that is important for this article includes: speeches, campaign issues, candidates, public appearances, policy issues, nomination, leadership, development, announcing and launching of projects including minor rural projects, launching of social and political events, manifestos, photographs and pictures (of candidates, political leaders, campaigners, posters, billboards, banners), press releases, interviews, comments, editorial, development issues, catchphrases, exemplars, pseudo events such earth-breaking ceremony for projects. The people who are considered as actors in election news include the executive (the chief minister and members of his cabinet as well as the prime minister and members of the federal cabinet), political parties, party leaders (at all level including grassroots level), individual politicians, candidates, political entrepreneurs, interest groups, campaigners, and party supporters.

The fourth step is to do the demarcation between articles/pictures and within them so that measurement can be practically done. The fifth step is to measure the length and width of the demarcations, and this is followed by calculating the size of the articles/pictures, and tabulating the data using excel. The data collected in this manner should be an accurate representation of messages conveyed on the Ninth Sarawak State Election and of the visual and perceived intentions of the newspapers, which published politics news are related to.

### MEDIA-GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIP

The press needs to have some kinds of media relationship with the government as a large percent of the sources of its political reporting come from the government (Asante 2000: 45). The key issue in this relationship is press freedom or press autonomy. Is the media-government relationship going to restrict what the press can report about the government? Is the government going to pressure the press on what it can and cannot do? Is the government going to interfere with the basic role of the press which is to disseminate political news per se? Will the government limit press freedom? Defined by Weaver (in Asante 1997: 12) as:

(1) the relative absence of governmental restraints on the media; (2) the relative absence of government and other restraints on the media; and (3) as not only the absence of restraints on the media, but also the presence of those conditions necessary for the dissemination of a diversity of ideas and opinions to a relatively large audience such as enforced right of access to newspapers and radio stations.

Can journalists be defenders of democracy from Machiavellian politicians whose main concern is with “winning, not governing, and all political actions, no matter how noble, are motivated by strategic intent” (Louw 2005: 69). Should the press provide ... “the forum for an exchange of comments on and criticism of the nations’s affairs and thus serve as watchdog of the people’s rights...” (Asante, 1997: 12), and be ... “free to criticise the policies and personnel of the power elite without fear of arbitrary sanction”... (Sunwoo Nam & Inhwon Oh in Asante 1997: 19) In studying the media-politics relationship, Street (2001: 8) raised these frequently asked questions about this relationship ... “when and where do people act freely, as the authors of their own fate; when and where do they act at the behest of others?”

The strong media-government relationship in Malaysia is common knowledge. The mainstream media, for example, played important role in supporting the Mahathir administration despite the vigorous development of civil society forces and non-state actors in late 1990s (McCargo 2003: 19), particularly in the aftermath of the sacking of his deputy in 1998 and the Asian Financial crisis of 1997. Media in Malaysia are owned by government-related companies and/or government-related individuals and these situations are no different from media-ownership in many other countries which Merrill and Lowenste had aptly categorised as:

1. Private – Ownership by individuals or non-government corporations; supported primarily by advertising or subscriptions.
2. Multiparty – Ownership by competitive political parties; subsidized by party or party members.
3. Government – Owned by government or dominant government party; subsidized primarily by government funds or government-controlled licence fees (Asante 1997: 17).

All mainstream Malay and English language newspapers in Malaysia belong to companies that have connections to the political parties that have governed the country since the country's independence in 1957. *The Borneo Post*, which has an ABC-audited circulation of 86,000 in 2006 is the largest English-language daily newspaper in Borneo, and is not only circulated in Sarawak, but also in Sabah and Brunei. It is owned by the KTS group, a Sarawak conglomerate belong to ethnic Chinese family in Sibu that has a strong connection to the Chinese-based Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) ([http://en.wikipedia/wiki/Borneo\\_Post](http://en.wikipedia/wiki/Borneo_Post)). *The Eastern Times* was established in April 2006 to take over the vacuum after the Sarawak Tribune, formerly the oldest newspaper in the state, was suspended in February 2006 (<http://www.easterntimes.com.my>). *Eastern Times* is owned by some one with close ties to the Chief Minister and Parti Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB). *The New Straits Times*, *Utusan Melayu* and *Utusan Malaysia*, for example, are owned by companies that have close link to the United Malay National Organisations (Mohd Yusof Hussain 2003: 47), the country's dominant political party, and the party of the country's Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister since independence.

#### ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Mass media are vital to any political system that ... "without them political activity in its contemporary forms could hardly carry on at all" ... (Seymour-Ure 1974: 16 in Anderson 1997: 17) Newspapers, according to Harper (2002) provides information lifeline to events that affect communities throughout the world". They become integral part of our life because they perform certain important functions.

In his now famous 1852 editorial, Delane wrote of the role of the press this way:

The first duty of the press is to obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the events of the time and instantly by disclosing them to make them the common property of the nation. The press lives by disclosures...bound to tell the truth as we find it without fear of consequences – to lend no convenient shelter to acts of injustice and oppression, but to consign them to the judgment of the world ... the duty of the journalist is the same as that of the historian – to seek out truth, above all things, and to present to his readers not such things as statecraft would wish them to know, but the truth as near as he can attain it (Delane in Louw 2005: 6).

Algee et al. (1994: 87), on the other hand, describe the roles of the press as:

1. To inform readers objectively about what is happening in the community, country, and world;
2. To comment on the news in order to bring these development into focus;
3. To provide means whereby persons with goods and services to sell can advertise their wares;
4. To campaign for desirable civic projects and to help eliminate undesirable conditions;
5. To give readers a portion of entertainment through such devices as comic strips, cartoons, and special features;
6. To serve readers as a friendly counselor, information bureau, and champion of their rights.

The first three functions are generally referred to as the fundamental functions of the newspaper, while the later three are its secondary functions

The basic role of the media in Malaysia cannot be any different from the roles of the media that have been described by Algee et al. (1994). However, in the actual reporting and publishing, the role of the press in Malaysia could have been compromised as most of them are owned by government-related companies and government-related individuals. Whether the press is willing to divulge information in areas of good governance, and provide the public balanced and informed election/politics news is a matter of grave concern for many? As for the privately-owned press, the issue is the type of political and legal environment in which it is allowed to operate. The kind of freedom given to the press will affect its performance.

The media can make a country's political system more transparent because through the media people can watch the behaviour of the government and its officials, understand how the government operates and participate in decision making. The government can be made accountable for its decisions and actions through the media. Without media coverage, political transparency cannot possibly happen. But mass media, according to Alexander and Hanson (2003), are capable of frustrating the values of political transparency even though it may appear to be serving those values (Algee et al. 1994: 164). As the political and legal environment is not really conducive for press freedom, political transparency (Alexander & Hanson 2004: 168) in Malaysia is difficult. Some of the peculiar issues regarding the operation of the press in this country which may affect its performance include:

1. Press freedom – by definition, Malaysia do not practice free press as explained in the definition earlier even though freedom of the press is guaranteed by the Federal Constitution. In Malaysia, the press needs a license to publish, whereas in Britain, in comparison, any one can publish a newspaper so long as he or she doesn't break the law in the process (Skeggs 1992: 119). There is no censor, no licensing, and the press is in private hands. The press in Malaysia also has never been accorded certain rights and immunities, as in America, for example, where the proprietors, editors and journalist claimed that they publish in the public interest (Seaton 1998: 119).
2. Watch dog – The press doesn't play this role. The press is supposed to act as watch dog to protect human rights, to stop injustices, and to prevent oppression. The government does not like any negative reporting on its policies, on the way it administers the country, on the way it manages ethnic-relations, on the way it runs the economy, and so on.
3. Disclosure of truth – The government does not like the press to disclose many things that it did as truth could hurt.
4. Printing act – This act allows the government to evaluate the performance of the press every year. The license may be renewed or may not be renewed, depending on whether it has performed to the likings of the government.

5. Other statutes – The government can use other types of Acts to go after those who offend it and any one and any organisation that is connected to it publicly by way of print media or other form of media technologies. Some of these Acts include the Internal Security Act (ISA) which allows for detention without trial for two years, and the Official Secret Act (OSA) which makes it an offence to disclose official information without approval; and the Seditious Act.
6. Media-ownership – The owners belong to the same group of people who govern the country, while the editors and the journalist know who pay their salary.

## FINDINGS

### STRUCTURAL BIAS ON THE NATIONAL FRONT

The conventional wisdom is that newspapers are bias and are guilty of partisanship. The findings of the study on the election coverage by the two English-language newspapers in Sarawak on the Ninth Sarawak State General Election suggest that there are major differences in the ways the two newspapers disseminate news on the government and on the opposition.

In the Ninth Sarawak State General Election, the total size of the election news (articles and photographs) published by *The Borneo Post* is 85,295.0 sq. cm. (Table 1). Of this figure, 88.7 percent or 75,686.4 sq. cm is election news on the *Barisan Nasional* or the National Front or the Government, while only 11.3 percent or 9,608.6 sq. cm. is on the Opposition. As for the *Eastern Times*, 99.6 percent or 56,689.3 sq. cm. of a total figure of 56,909.8 sq. cm of its election news is on the *Barisan Nasional*, compared to 0.4 percent or 220.5 sq. cm. on the Opposition. Of the 9,829.1 sq. cm of the election news communicated on the opposition, 97.8 percent is published by *The Borneo Post*.

TABLE 1. Total Size of Article for Barisan Nasional and Opposition (in sq.cm)

Newspaper	Barisan Nasional (%)		Opposition (%)		Total (%)		
<i>The Borneo Post</i>	75,686.4	57.2	88.7	9,608.6	97.8	11.3	85,295.0 (100)
<i>Eastern Times</i>	56,689.3	42.8	99.6	220.5	2.2	0.4	56,909.8 (100)
Total	132,375.7	100		9,829.1	100		142,204.8

### ELECTION COVERAGE BY POLITICAL PARTY

The breakdown of news coverage according to the *Barisan Nasional* component parties shows that *Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu* (PBB) has 41.3 percent of



the total size of the election news communicated by the two newspapers from 10-19 May 2006 (Table 2). The Sarawak United People's Party, a Chinese political party based in Sarawak, gets 34.6 percent of the total size of news communicated. The United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) receives 12.4 percent, while the two Iban-based political parties, the Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) and the *Parti Rakyat Sarawak* (PRS), respectively receive 5.4 percent and 3.5 percent. The remaining 2.8 percent goes to the 'Other BN parties', which includes *Parti Gerakan Rakyat (Gerakan)*, Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and political parties from the State of Sabah.

TABLE 2. *Barisan Nasional* party (in sq. cm)

Party	<i>The Borneo Post</i> (%)	<i>Eastern Times</i> (%)	Total (%)	% of Total
PBB	24,080.4	22,579.7	46,635.7	41.3
SUPP	27,571.1	11,561.4	39,132.5	34.6
UMNO	7,814.8	6,212.1	14,026.9	12.4
SPDP	3,852.0	2,186.1	6,038.1	5.4
PRS	2,164.3	1,812.2	3,976.5	3.5
Other BN Parties	2,550.4	601.3	3,151.7	2.8
Sub-Total	68033.0	44,928.4	112,961.4	100
Pro-BN article	7,653.4	11,760.9	19,414.3	
Total	75,686.4	56,689.3	132,375.7	

The Borneo Post has ninety-seven articles on thirty PBB candidates and Members of Parliament (Table 3). The total size of those articles is 24,080.4 sq. cm. The paper also has seventy-seven photographs of PBB leaders with a total size of 15,191.6 sq.cm. Top-five PBB leaders receive 57.3 percent of the total election news communicated, while the bottom-10 only receives 7.1 percent. Thirty-six of the seventy-seven photographs or 46.8 percent is on the same top-5 leaders, while the bottom-10 only receives 7.8 percent of the total size of photograph published. The total election coverage on PBB candidates and Members of Parliament by The Borneo Post is 39,272.0 sq.cm.

TABLE 3. PBB Candidates and Members of Parliament – The Borneo Post (in sq.cm)

Name	No. of Article	Total Size of Article	No. of Photo	Total Size of Photo	Total	Percent %
Taib Mahmud	32	8,483.4	15	3,926.4	12,409.8	31.6
Total Top-5	57	15,104.0	36	7,402.9	22,506.9	57.3
Other 25	40	8,976.4	41	7,788.7	16,765.1	42.70
Bottom 10	6	1,017.0	6	1,807.7	2,824.7	7.1
Total PBB	97	24,080.4	77	15,191.6	39,272.0	

*The Eastern Times* communicated larger election news on PBB than *The Borneo Post* (Table 4). The total size of election news communicated on PBB by *Eastern Times* is 61,383.2 sq. cm or 22,110.2 sq. cm or 56 percent larger than the ones communicated by *The Borneo Post*. Even though the total size of its 111 articles is smaller by 1,525.1 sq. cm, but the total size of its 188 photographs is bigger by 23,636.3 sq. cm than the total size of the 77 photographs of PBB leaders depicted in *The Borneo Post*, accounting for the reason why it has bigger over all coverage on election news on PBB than the *Eastern Times*.

TABLE 4. PBB Candidates and Members of Parliament – Eastern Times (in sq.cm)

Name	No. of Article	Total Size of Article	No. of Photo	Total Size of Photo	Total	Percent (%)
Taib Mahmud	37	9,854	66	15,232.4	25,086.4	40.9
Total Top 5	60	13,967	98	21,924.3	35,891.3	58.4
Other 35	51	7,995.0	90	14,771.9	22,766.9	41.6
Bottom 10	6	593.3	12	2,131.7	2,725.0	4.4
Total PBB	111	22,555.3	188	38,827.9	61,383.2	

As in *The Borneo Post*, top-five PBB leaders in *Eastern Times* account for more than half of the total election news coverage received by the party. The top-five leaders respectively receive 58.4 percent and 52.1 percent of the total size of the election news and of the total size of the photograph published. The bottom-10 leaders, in contrast, only receive 4.4 percent and 6.4 percent respectively.

Unlike PBB which receives larger total election news coverage in Eastern Times by 22,110.2 sq cm (61,382.2 sq. cm to 39,272.0 sq.cm), SUPP receives larger total election news coverage in *The Borneo Post* (27,571.1 sq.cm to 11,561.4 sq.cm) (Tables 5 & 6). Even though SUPP receives bigger total coverage on the photographs of its leaders in Eastern Times by 15,428.8 sq. cm (35,175.6 sq. cm to 19,746.8 sq. cm) than in *The Borneo Post*, the coverage of the election news communicated on its leader by the former is much smaller than the one communicated in the latter (11,561.4 sq.cm to 27,571.1 sq.cm). This is the reason why *Eastern Times* has smaller election news on SUPP than *The Borneo Post*.

*The Borneo Post* has 113 articles on SUPP leaders with a total size of 27,571.1 sq. cm. In contrast, *Eastern Times* has 73 articles and 11,561.4 sq. cm. The total size of election news communicated on SUPP leaders in *The Borneo Post* is 16,009.7 sq. cm or 138.5 percent bigger than the total size of election news communicated on them in *Eastern Times*.

TABLE 5. SUPP Candidates and Members of Parliament – The Borneo Post (in sq.cm)

Name	No. of Article	Total Size of Article	No. of Photo	Total Size of Photo	Total	Percent (%)
George Chan Hon Nam	23	6,390.8	13	2,353.9	8,744.7	18.5
Total Top 5	65	16,920.5	47	8,223.1	25,143.6	53.1
Other 17	48	10,650.6	64	11,523.7	22,174.3	46.8
Bottom 10	13	2,953.7	26	4,411.1	7,364.8	5.6
Total SUPP	113	27,571.1	111	19,746.8	47,317.9	

As in the case of PBB where top-five of its leaders dominate the election news communicated by both *The Borneo Post* and *Eastern Times*, top-five SUPP leaders also dominate the election news coverage by both newspapers. Top-5 SUPP leaders in *The Borneo Post* receive 65 percent and 47 percent of the total size of articles and of the total size of the photographs published respectively, while top-five of them in *Eastern Times* receive 42 percent and 64 percent respectively. Meanwhile, the bottom-10 leaders only receive 13 percent and 26 percent respectively in *The Borneo Post*, and 10 percent and 23 percent in *Eastern Times*.

TABLE 6. SUPP Candidates and Members of Parliament – Eastern Times (in sq.cm)

Name	No. of Article	Total Size of Article	No. of Photo	Total Size of Photo	Total	Percent (%)
George Chan Hon Nam	19	3,254.2	16	4,450.5	7,704.7	16.5
Top 5	42	7,277.4	54	15,517.2	22,794.6	48.8
Other 18	31	4,288.0	88	19,658.4	23,942.4	52.2
Bottom 10	10	1,170.0	23	4,593.0	5,763.0	12.3
Total SUPP	73	11,561.4	142	35,175.6	46,737.0	

The total size of the election news communicated by *The Borneo Post* and *Eastern Times* on the Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) and on the Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS) is relatively small. The total size of election news communicated respectively by *The Borneo Post* and *Eastern Times* on SPDP is 5,989.5 sq. cm and 7,214.9 sq. cm. These figures are only 9.8 percent and 11.8 percent of the total PBB election news published by *Eastern Times*. *The Borneo Post* has 17 articles and 12 photographs on SPDP leaders, while *Eastern Times* has 12 and 24 respectively. In contrast, PBB has 97 articles and 77 photographs communicated in *The Borneo Post*, and 111 and 188 respectively in *Eastern Times*.

The press coverage on PRS is the least of the four Sarawak-based *Barisan Nasional* component parties. The total size of election news published by both newspapers on PRS leaders is 3,288.0 sq. cm and 3,531.2 sq. cm, and these are only 5.4 percent and 5.8 percent of PBB's total in *Eastern Times*. The party's total number of article is 8 and 12 respectively for the two newspapers. PBB, in contrast, has 97 and 111 articles respectively for the two newspapers.

In contrast, the press only gives little coverage for opposition news. Of the two newspapers, only *The Borneo Post* did publish something on the opposition candidates, while *Eastern Times* did not publish any thing on the opposition (Table 7). *The Borneo Post* has 28 articles and 7 photographs on opposition candidates and its Members of Parliament. The total size of the articles is 4,217.9 sq. cm or 6.9 percent of PBB's total in *Eastern Times*, while the total size of the opposition photograph is 642.1 sq cm or 1.7 percent of the total size of the PBB's total of 38,827.9 sq.cm in the same newspaper.

TABLE 7. DAP and PKR Candidates and Members of Parliament in The Borneo Post and Eastern Times (in sq. cm)

Name	No. of Article	Total Size of Article	No. of Photo	Total Size of Photo	Total	Percent %
Newspaper 'A'						
Dominique Ng	6	955.0	2	183.4	1,138.4	23.4
Violet Yong	4	670.7	2	344.0	1,014.7	20.9
Wong Ho Leng	4	577.1	0	0	577.1	11.9
Ting Tze Fui	3	451.3	2	75	526.3	10.9
Chong Chieng Jen	2	342.7	0	0	342.7	7.1
David Wong	2	283.7	0	0	283.7	5.8
Voon Lee Shan	2	243.7	0	0	243.7	5.0
Chong Eng	1	191.1	1	39.7	230.8	4.7
(Fed-MP)						
Ting Chek Ming	1	160.5	0	0	160.5	3.3
Fong Fo Kuan	1	122.2	0	0	122.2	2.5
(Fed-MP)						
Lim Kit Siang	1	120.9	0	0	120.9	2.5
(Fed-MP)						
Fong Fau Teck	1	99	0	0	99	2.0
Total	28	4,217.9	7	642.1	4,860.0	100
Newspaper 'B'						
	0	0	0	0	0	0

The opposition candidates that have the two the biggest coverage in *The Borneo Post* is Dominique Ng from Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Violet Yong from the Democratic Action Party (DAP), who respectively receives 1,138.4 sq. cm and 1,014.7 sq. cm of election news published. The other opposition candidates

that managed to get something published about them are Wong Ho Leng, Ting Tze Fui, Chong Chieng Jen, David Wong, Voon Lee Shan, and Fong Fau Teck from DAP, and all of them are given less than 600 sq.cm each.

## DISCUSSION

Is the press guilty of structural bias? How does the press select its election news? What factors influence its decisions on what election news to publish? These are the things that come to mind when we read that certain newspapers tend to concentrate or focus more on certain individuals, parties, organisations or areas. This structural bias could happen as news people decide what is considered as newsworthy and what is not. In the Ninth Sarawak State General Election, both the *Borneo Post* and the *Eastern Times* tended to concentrate on the Chief Minister, hence presidentialising the election. The Chief Minister, Taib Mahmud, is portrayed as ‘the Man’, voting for the National Front candidates therefore is tantamount to voting for him and for continual progress and development. His deputy George Chan Hong Nam also received extensive coverage in both *The Borneo Post* and *Eastern Times*.

It is difficult to imagine the press to be impartial and balanced in their coverage and treatment of political issues as editors or proprietors often take side. Some elections in the West, for instance, have been won by the press.

The *Sun* [for example has] (sic) claimed credit for the surprise victory of the Conservative in the General Election of 1992, and then Party Treasurer at the time, Lord MacAlphine... paid tribute to the tabloids for their help (Barendt 1998: 108).

However, in the General Election of 1997, the *Sun* changed allegiance and support Labour six weeks before polling day (ibid). Because of the influence of the press, political leaders often try diligently to court newspapers’ editors and proprietors. Tony Blair, in opposition, for instance, successfully courted Rupert Murdoch and the editors of his newspaper, the *Sun*. The big Labour majority in that election had been attributed to the support given by this tabloid. In contrast, *The Borneo Post* tended to give bigger election news coverage to SUPP, while *Eastern Times* gave bigger coverage to PBB. The cleavage in terms of the coverage given to the two parties by the two newspapers is not an unexpected situation. *The Borneo Post* tended to support SUPP more maybe because its owner is an ethnic Chinese and SUPP is a Chinese political party. In contrast, *Eastern Times* gave more support to PBB, a Malay-based political party. *Eastern Times* is owned by a Malay-based business interest.

News, as Jamieson and Campbell (1997: 39) aptly explained, ... “is gathered, written, edited, produced, and disseminated by human beings who are part of organizations and who have beliefs and values”... In this connection it is therefore hard to imagine that the editors of government-related newspapers such as

*Utusan Melayu*, *Utusan Malaysia*, *The New Straits Times* and *the Star*, for instance, would publish election news that are anti-UMNO and/or its functionaries. Press organisation, its owners, its editors, and its journalists have certain functions to perform and goals to achieve. Their value and belief system will no doubt influence the messages they are going to publish. The same goes to *The Borneo Post* and *Eastern Times*. Their editors must have known who their bosses are and who their political friends are.

Generally there are various considerations to be made that could make objectivity in writing difficult to achieve, such as the profit motive, pressure from the government, owners and the advertisers, source of the news and the role of the journalists themselves. These six pressures have made objectivity in writing difficult to achieve. How can a journalist be objective when the sources of the news, facts, and stories are already bias? How can the press be objective when its main source of news is the government? In other words, the press is practicing partisanship, and this partisanship is [often] supported by party patrons in and out of government (Patterson 1998: 18).

As already been mentioned, *The Borneo Post* is more supportive of SUPP. It has 113 articles on the party's candidates and Members of Parliament, and together these articles have a total size of 27,571.1 sq.cm. In contrast, *Eastern Times* only has 73 articles on SUPP, and a total size of 11,561.4 sq. cm. This means that the *Borneo Post* has 36 articles more on SUPP candidates and Members of Parliament than *Eastern Times*. The total size of the article on SUPP leaders in *The Borneo Post* is also bigger than in *Eastern Times* by 16,009.7 sq.cm.

In comparison, *Eastern Times* supports PBB more than *The Borneo Post*. *Eastern Times* has 111 articles on PBB leaders, compared to 97 in *The Borneo Post*. The total size of articles on PBB leaders in *Eastern Times* is smaller than the total size of articles on PBB leaders in *The Borneo Post* by 1,525.1 sq. cm, but its coverage in terms of the total size of the photographs of PBB leaders is bigger by 23,636.3 sq.cm. Overall, *Eastern Times* gives 61,382.2 sq. cm of election news to PBB, compared to 39,272.0 sq. cm given by *The Borneo Post*.

However, both newspapers give little coverage to the two Iban-led political parties. (SPDP and PRS), to Iban leaders, politicians and candidates, and to issues peculiar to the Iban who mainly reside in the rural areas. Tan Sri Alfred Jabu, an Iban deputy Chief Minister and a veteran politician with about 40 years experienced in politics in fact received less coverage than some junior Malay and Chinese politicians in PBB and SUPP respectively. The lack of coverage of election news on Iban leaders and rural areas could be due to two main reasons. First, the Iban do not have a newspaper of their own which could cover election news on their leaders as *The Borneo Post* did for SUPP and Chinese leaders and *Eastern Times* did for PBB and Malay leaders. Second, perhaps there are no interesting election issues in Iban areas to cover.

In terms of the coverage for the opposition, *The Borneo Post* is more willing to publish election news on the opposition than the *Eastern Times*. For instance,

it publishes 28 articles on opposition leaders and 7 photographs of them, whereas *Eastern Times* does not publish any thing at all on the opposition. As mentioned in the abstract, newspapers have tremendous impact on how people perceive their world and on how they make decisions. As to whether they change the voters behaviour is difficult to say but judging from the coverage given to the opposition leaders by *The Borneo Post*, there is some element of truth in this. Seven of the 8 opposition that received some coverage in *The Borneo Post* actually won and all of them won against Chinese candidates from SUPP. (Table 7).

Compared to the *Eastern Times*, *The Borneo Post* is more liberal of the two newspapers as it also tends to cover more election news of the other political parties. For instance, *The Borneo Post* gives bigger coverage to UMNO (by 1,602.7 sq. cm), SPDP (by 1,665.9 sq. cm), and 'Other BN Party (1,949.1 sq. cm). The *Eastern Times* however gives bigger coverage to PRS by a mere 386.1 sq. cm. It also gives more space to pro-BN election news than *The Borneo Post* by 4,107.5 sq. cm.

In terms of key personalities in the election, Taib Mahmud, the State Chief Minister receives bigger coverage in *Eastern Times* than he does in *The Borneo Post*, while his deputy, Dr. George Chan receives more coverage in *The Borneo Post* than in *Eastern Times*. The Chief Minister has 37 articles and 66 photographs published in *Eastern Times*, compared to 32 and 15 in *The Borneo Post*. The total size of election news communicated on the Chief Minister by *Eastern Times* is 25,086.4 sq. cm or 12,676.6 sq. cm or 102.1 percent larger than the ones communicated on him by *The Borneo Post*.

In comparison, *The Borneo Post* publishes 23 articles with a total size of 6,309.8 sq. cm on George Chan, compared to 19 published by *Eastern Times* and with a total size of 3,254.2 sq. cm. The election news published by *The Borneo Post* on George Chan is 3,136.6 sq. cm or 96.4 percent bigger than ones published by *Eastern Times*.

In terms of areas to be covered, both newspapers tend to concentrate more on urban and/or semi urban constituencies. This could be due to the fact that both newspapers published in English, and they are more readers in the urban areas who speak the language. Or could this be also due to fact that there are more election issues in urban areas than in rural areas. Or is the selection of the election news to be published market driven? Or does ethnicity play certain roles in the selection of the news. But more importantly, there seems to exist some forms of structural bias in the way the two newspapers select their election news. Bias reporting is dangerous because the ... "representations of the world actually shape thoughts and practices within in"... (Street 2001: 16). A bias representation by the newspapers can be a problem for democracy and this is an antithesis to the good intention of holding the Ninth Sarawak General Election which is trying to show that democracy is alive and well in the state.

## CONCLUSION

A study of the media and politics is a tedious task. A lot of time is spent on identifying and measuring the election news. The results of the study indicate that there exist certain forms of bias in the way the press selects its elections news and this has also affected its performance in terms of presenting the public with more balanced news, in promoting good governance, and in providing interesting readings. The two newspapers are certainly biased towards the Nasional Front or the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) or the government. There are few reasons which could have attributed to this and this may include: (1) media ownership, (2) the relationships of the proprietors of the press and their editors and journalists with certain individuals in the society, (3) the goals of the press, (4) the government as a major source of news, and (5) the political and legal environment in which the press operates.

*The Borneo Post* is owned by a Chinese. From the data obtained from the various tables as already been shown, the two newspapers also play ethnic cards. For example, *The Borneo Post* tends to give bigger coverage to SUPP, a Chinese political party in Sarawak, to Chinese leaders, politicians and candidates. In contrasts, the *Eastern Times* is owned by a Malay business interest and as can be seen from the various tables, this newspaper tends to give bigger coverage to PBB, a Malay-based political parties, to Malay leaders, politicians and candidates as it does for other non-Malay political parties, leaders, politicians and candidates vis-à-vis SUPP, SPDP, PRS, and leaders, politicians and candidates from the other ethnic communities such as the Iban and the Chinese, and who by the way, also belong to the BN fold.

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