

## Agenda Setting: Probing the Issues during the 13th General Election

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### ABSTRACT

This study discusses the development of agenda setting and its application in political communication especially in general elections in Malaysia. The vast majority of studies on Agenda Setting have found widespread support for a media influence on issue salience despite studies used different methodologies and issues. The theory postulates that people were simply led to think about the agenda as set by the media. The salience of the media agenda would then be reflected as the people agenda, measured through rank correlation. With the emergence of technologies, questions arise among scholars about whether the theory on Agenda Setting would remain viable in later years and whether people would continue to obtain their news from a given number of media outlets, given the range of new media channels being made available over the years. The discussion of this study contributes to a better understanding of agenda setting in current Malaysian media landscape.

**Keywords:** *Agenda setting, general elections, media agenda, public agenda, media landscape.*

### INTRODUCTION

Agenda Setting remains one of the few dominant theories in communication to be accepted by scholars in other disciplines as well. This year marks a significant years of Agenda Setting research since its first formulation by McCombs and Shaws (1972). Much research has been done either in the United States or elsewhere relating to Agenda Setting. This indicates the acceptance of the theory in many societies, although predominantly it is still championed by scholars from the United States. Therefore, it necessitates a review of the development in communication studies in Malaysia and perhaps in other developing societies as well by placing Agenda Setting on the theoretical focus.

Social science study of communication emerged after World War II, mainly pioneered by psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists. In late 1950s and 1960s communication research emerged from communication related departments to address practical issues such as to study communication in national development, violence, or in health-related campaigns.

In 1940s and 1950s, Lazarsfeld's research demonstrated media effects in politics and marketing while Carl Hovland's study focussed on the role of communication in changing the attitude and behaviour of the people. The overall focus was to identify media effects and suggested steps to reduce them. There was less emphasis given to the study on development theory, but theory from psychology and sociology was taken to explain ad hoc campaign failures.

This was somewhat different in the Malaysian context as formal communication studies that began in 1971 took an acceptance on effects studies (Idid, 2013). Agenda Setting was not duly recognized compared with studies in Diffusion of Innovation, News Diffusion and Media Systems. It was only in 1993 when the first book on Agenda Setting (Idid, 1994)

was produced, though the subject was written by other scholars in local universities prior to that, that Agenda Setting was given greater attention.

#### CHALLENGES IN THE FIELD

Communication and communication studies have captured the attention of so many scholars and policy makers over the past decades. Undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes have been established in many Asian universities. Recent studies show communication theories are being used by other disciplines as well and scholars are citing their peers in communication journals (Bryant & Pribanic-Smith, 2010). This is contrary to earlier studies when Potter et. al. (1993), citing Paisely (1986) and So (1986), found mass media research to be a net importer of ideas from other fields or communication. The field was then termed a “debtor nation” or regarded as “an intellectual ghetto” (Beniger, 1993), where citations were made to other disciplines or there was famine in mass communication research (Gans, 1972) due to lack of theories. Communication scholars “write for each other” and therefore their ideas were seldom of interest to other scholars in other fields (Herbst, 1993). Berger (1991) said that communication studies “suffer from an intellectual deficit in respect to related disciplines where the field imports far more than it exports (p. 102).

Though there has been improvement in the theoretical development in communication, others still lament otherwise saying that it is due to the fragmentation that has occurred and it being accompanied by an unrelenting pressure for specialisation. The second reason Pfau (2008) gave, was in the nature of research questions that communication scholars posed in their research that were low-keyed in focus. These are challenging issues that need to be given attention by communication scholars.

Why is that the field so duly acknowledged to have grown enormously but was later seen withering? (Berelson, 1952). Part of the answer could be that it has grown but has expanded in so many directions that scholars themselves find it difficult to perceive their outlines and keep track of the developments (Davidson & Yu, 1974). It could also be lacking in building theories or not helpful in solving practical problems. Or there could be research but they lack continuity thus not providing a cohesive picture. If one were to state this in general on the communication field, what would be the status of Agenda Setting?

#### AGENDA SETTING

Agenda Setting is one of the theories in mass communication that has been widely utilised by scholars. Potter, Cooper and Dupagne (1993), having analysed eight U.S. based internationally distributed peer-reviewed journals over nine-selected years (1965 to 1989), found the mass media research, as reflected in the majority of articles, to be a social science paradigm based with 95% using quantitative data. Most of these studies do not use probabilistic samples and only 12.9% are theory driven. A total of 31 theories were identified but three theories were predominant - Uses and Gratifications, Cultivation Hypothesis and Agenda Setting.

Another study by Bryant & Miron (2004) content analysed articles in three leading journals from 1955 to 1999 found that only five theories were referenced more than 30 times. These theories were Uses and Gratifications, Agenda Setting, Cultivation Theory, Social Learning and Marxism. In a follow up study in analysing journals from 2001 to 2004, eight theories were cited at least ten times (Framing, Agenda Setting, Cultivation Theory,

Mediation models, Third Person Effect, Uses and Gratifications, Selective Exposure, and Social Cognitive/Learning Theories). In a study by Potter and Riddle (2007) on 16 journals between 1993 and 2005, a total of 65% of the 336 articles failed to be guided by theories and among the 12, three theories mentioned in more than five articles were Third Person Effect, Agenda Setting, and Uses and Gratifications.

One can surmise that effects studies are seldom guided by theory as scholarship scrutinisation via content analysis of articles in communication journals over the past decades suggest little theoretical development in terms of reference or use. However, one can notice that if theories are referenced to, Agenda Setting would still be the one to predominate.

It was then said that people were simply led to think about the agenda as set by the media. The salience of the media agenda would then be reflected as the people agenda, measured through rank correlation. The vast majority of studies on Agenda Setting have found widespread support for a media influence on issue salience despite studies used different methodologies and issues (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). A total of 500 empirical works have been recorded since 1972 (Johnson, 2014), with the majority establishing strong support for the claim that media narrowed the public's attention of what were the important issues of the day.

Scholars have been tracking Agenda Setting over several years noting the varied methodologies used, the number of issues examined (single issue vs. multiple issues), the unit of analysis under investigation (individual vs. aggregate data studies), and whether media or media content were the independent variables. Finally, in terms of time, the analysis used a cross-sectional or longitudinal research design (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007).

There were several developments since the 1972 reported findings by McCombs and Shaw. Most recent studies have examined contingent effects ranging from personal characteristics of individuals exposed to the media, and media use patterns among respondents. Media's impact on the public's priorities is contingent upon a range of receivers (public), sender (media) or context (country) features (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008).

However, there were also those who doubted whether the theory on Agenda Setting would remain viable in later years (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). Scholars expressing scepticism on the continued popularity of the Agenda Setting questioned whether people would continue to obtain their news from a given number of media outlets, given the range of new media channels being made available over the years. There has been media fragmentation leading to audience segmentation as a result of the advent of technology. Hence, there has been a decline from the once dominant "vertical media" (namely daily newspapers, television, and terrestrial radio) to the more complex "horizontal media" (cable networks, satellite radio) (Ragas & Roberts, 2009) or also to the new social media.

The audience could reach for other media outlets without being dependent on the traditional media for information. The audience for these traditional media would have declined while the news outlets have increased. Mass media fragmentation offers more media outlets and in the process generates audience segmentation (Mancini, 2013). The development of the new media has posed challenges to the Agenda Setting as the Internet, Twitter and blogs, YouTube are changing the nature, procedures and norms of professional journalism and in turn breed a new kind of journalism, citizen journalism (Mancini, 2013). Blogs have become an influential medium of news reporting (Muhammad Hakimi, Abdul

Latiff & Chang, 2016) as new technology has created new ways to disseminate information more quickly. Unlike traditional print and broadcast news media, online information providers are not bound by editorial and gatekeeping rules (Wilson, Leong, Nge & Ngerng, 2011). Hence Salman, Mustafa, Mohd Salleh & Ali (2016) suggested that agenda setting needs to be relooked into as the public agenda is taking a central stage through the new/social media.

Critics have overemphasised the people's overdependence on the Internet as recent research found that the public still get most of the news from online versions of traditional news source. News sites on the Internet and the off-line forms share a similar agenda (Johnson, 2014). However, several studies found that the traditional media still exerts an influence on the public agenda although the relationship is weakening due to the presence and adoption of the new media (Shehata & Stromback, 2013).

What is then the development of the Agenda Setting as a theory in communication? How far has this theory developed to be accepted well by communication scholars and some non-communication scholars? Or does it continue to be critically examined for its parsimony and its precision? It has to be acknowledged that theories are constructed within a social context but for the theories to survive they have to cross time and space.

One scholar (Lang, 2013) has blamed Agenda Setting hypothesis for abandoning the dominant paradigm of mass communication by stating that its premise of media effects were not powerful enough in influencing thinking but only made people to think about. Lang (2013) opined that the dominant paradigm is about the powerful effects of the media on society and any statement of premise outside this dominant paradigm created doubt on mass communication as a paradigm. By abandoning the premise that media had effects on society, the dominant paradigm led to the growth of two alternatives, namely looking at communication and culture/critical studies, and communication from the basis of psychology. However, a careful literature review on Agenda Setting has shown that communication scholars still regard the theory to be part of the studies on the effects. The second level Agenda Setting has made a compelling argument that certain attributes could increase the salience of an issue or object (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). In fact, to quote, "From basic level effects, where the media tell people what to think about, the Agenda Setting tradition in communication has evolved to the point where the media also influence the way people think." (Wolfe, Jones & Baumgartner, 2013: 176). Findings have shown the linkage of various contingent effects on the dependent variable in public agenda to readily accept the theory on Agenda Setting (Kim & McCombs, 2007).

#### FERMENT OF THE FIELD

Communication Studies developed in a very disparate way without any dominant personalities or figures to articulate the philosophy of its growth. Some would lament that there was hardly any philosophy behind the growth of communication studies, more so among the sub-fields like public relations, advertising, broadcasting or journalism.

Disciplines like psychology, political science and sociology labour a lot on the theories, not of course at the expense of their methodological commitment. They would accept different methodologies but their main methodologies remained dominant to answer their theoretical problems. Though there has been lots of labourious work, there is nothing of such a commitment as the earnest scientists who would put more efforts than the sociologists, thinking in and out of the laboratories. However, the development of theories

to reflect the development of ideas in this field remained the primary concern of sociologists.

Sociology scholars come mainly from Europe with added contributions of scholars from the United States. The United States through its repository of knowledge and clout then furthered the study of sociology worldwide, but the ideas from the European scholars remain the base on which the ideas of sociology developed. The contested ideas from two ideological perspectives led to the renowned discussion which was dubbed "Ferment of the Field." It was a contest of the perspective of post-positivism that is seen in the communication studies championed by scholars from the United States and the critical scholars championed mainly by the European scholars.

#### THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Scholars will normally hold on to Kuhn's paradigm to stage a premise of their understanding on theory, namely:

- (1) An understanding of the fundamental nature of the matter being studied;
- (2) What specific or novel ways do scientists use to observe the world; and
- (3) What fundamental questions are being asked?

Theories are tools to enable scholars to understand the world, and hence theories should be of some utility (Lang, 2013). Theories in communication should address clearly communication problems. There are many statements made about and on theories. One is a statement made by Wilson who said that theories had to fight for survival. This means that scholars are always on the lookout (doing research) to verify or to reject hypotheses. If research constantly discover findings rejecting these hypotheses (and hypotheses are the testing arm of theories) then theories will lose their respect and will slowly fade away from public attention.

The second statement is that theories must not stagnate (Kim & Grunig, 2011). This statement refers more to the need for theories to be able to heed the challenge of time. They must incorporate new concepts and be more specific to understand issues. An example is the Situational Theory of Publics (Grunig, 1989), that evolved into the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) by incorporating more variables that previously the Situational Theory of Publics could not explain.

The statement that theories must not stagnate can be used to refer to the development of Agenda Setting. It began with just Agenda Setting when Media Agenda Salience was said to be correlated with the Salience of Public Agenda. This conceptual relationship developed when more variables were incorporated to call it Agenda Building with Media Agenda, Public Agenda and Policy Agenda.

Later development saw conceptualisations and measurements of concepts on salience, agenda and the theoretical construct of the theory. It involved the listing of the possible antecedents of media agenda and public agenda and the consequent behavioural effects. Scholars claim that for a better development of the Agenda Setting theory, the process needs to be made explicit. Contingent factors need to be spelt out on Agenda Setting relating to research on public and political agenda, although Vligenthart and Walgrave (2008) say the conditions stimulating public or political Agenda Setting have been spelt out.

Inter-media Agenda Setting, First and Second Level and of recent Third Level, Priming and Framing are some of the concepts that have been introduced. The fundamental concepts are still the salience transfer of Media Agenda on the Public Agenda. The distinction between the first level (salience of objects) and the second level of Agenda Setting (Salience of attributes) enters into the literature of priming and attitude priming (Kim & McCombs, 2007). Theories must provide a clear understanding. In the case of Agenda Setting, the battle is to provide a clear understanding under different contingencies and under different media system examples that the theories have to withstand in order to survive. By inching its way through the various tests and screens, Agenda Setting as a theory needs to prove its survivability.

#### MEDIA AGENDA

Studies have looked at the factors influencing the report of events as news, then later to be construed as the media agenda. The extra external media factors affecting the Media Agenda include Advertisers, Public Relations, Political Personalities, Government Authorities while at the organisational level, owners and top executives do influence the inclusion of news (Colistra, 2012).

#### EXPOSURE TO THE MEDIA

For Agenda Setting to take place, audience members must be exposed to the media for them to read, watch and eventually to understand meanings contained in the messages. There are varying degrees of media exposure with some exposed more than others. Exposure is perhaps one of the main engagements as various other characteristics come into the picture, such as attention and comprehension given to the news items.

Weaver (2009) listed three major factors to account for media exposure, namely interest, uncertainty about the message and effort required to attend to the message. A need for orientation was also developed by including relevance and uncertainty. This need for orientation captured the attention of scholars when it was postulated that an increased need for orientation led to increased media use, thus leading to increased Agenda Setting effects of the media (Weaver, 2009).

#### PUBLIC AGENDA

Although media is said to be the main agent on the transfer of agenda to the public, yet there are other factors that have not been given greater recognition to being agents shaping public agenda. Of course, there has been debate on the influence of the new media over the traditional media but beyond that scholars also would like to know the influence of Non-Government Organizations, Government Policies (through Policy Agenda) and the family institution.

#### THIS WORKSHOP'S CONCERN

The workshop discussed issues related to agenda setting in a multiracial society but limited itself to studying the use of the traditional media, namely the print media. Of relevance was research done by Idid and Chang (2012) who investigated the diversity of issues and public opinion in the Malaysian plural society. Studies on agenda setting in other areas did not generally probe the differences in the portrayal of news and opinion among the sub population segments. The workshop was held within the context of the 13<sup>th</sup> General Election

held on May 5, 2013 to provide a better focus on agenda setting as media during the elections were keen to highlight current issues and an attentive public would be in a better position to articulate on them.

The four groups in the workshop delved into specific issues on agenda setting. The group had met earlier to discuss the general guidelines of issues and the acceptance of the media given the several constraints faced. It was decided to accept a common list of issues and to study the issues set by the Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil language newspapers.

This paper attempts to raise the issue of the Public Agenda, namely in the recognition and the measurement of public opinion to be accepted as the agenda of the public. What will be the nature of media agenda if the agenda is to be disseminated by traditional and non-traditional media that are the work of professional journalists and citizen journalists? Would there more partisan or more selective perception of news as there occur greater media fragmentation and audience segmentation with the inclusion of the new media? Which media will the audience select to gain a perspective of the media audience to influence or to set their agenda? Would media agenda effect the public agenda or would it be one of the factors of policymaking agenda (Wolfe, Jones & Baumgartner, 2013).

The influence of issues on voting decision may be different among individuals, depending on how important these issues are to them. These issues may also be different during different periods. Failure of politicians to identify the positive issues and to counter the negative issues will cost them dearly during the elections. In numerous instances, issues are not properly identified and are not properly segmented to obtain the best for the candidates. This is a missed opportunity for politicians.

We would like to provide findings on how voters have identified selected issues over a period of years. Over the period of study, we were able to discern the issues that were thought as important and those that were regarded as marginal by Malaysians. These public opinion studies provided a depth of understanding on the changes that were perceived by Malaysians. Some issues were studied since 1989 but others were of recent.

#### DEFINITION OF ISSUES

Issues are defined differently. In U.S an issue is anything that parties or candidates disagree about (Bartle & Laycock, 2012; quoting Fiorino, 1981: 130). Issues are divided into position issues and valence. Position issues involve disagreement about the desirability of goals while valence issues have little disagreement on goals and they are limited to which party or candidate is most competent in achieving these goals.

Events are also selected as news and are conceived to be abrupt and salient, or they can be sustained and chronic (Wolfe, et al. 2013). Such portrayal of news of events can be regarded as indicating underlying social problems or they would be the beginning of policy making attention through the development of public agenda. An example is the report on the crime situation in Malaysia during the period of November 2013, where the public had blamed the abolishment of the Police Act a year earlier for the rise in crime rates. Hence, this prompted the government to consider the introduction of a revised Police Act.

Gallup started asking the question on identifying the most important problem to measure importance of problems among voters since 1935. MORI (Market and Opinion Research International) also asked the same question but rephrased it into asking the important *issue* instead of asking the most important *problem*. Jennings and Wlezien (2011) found that both questions on problems or issues tapped on the same thing.

In our study, we asked respondents in their estimation to identify what were the important problems the country faced. Over the years, beginning from 2009, we found that three categories, namely economics, crime and social issues predominate as the most important problems the country had been facing. This was in contrast to the recognition of other issues as being very important facing the country prior 2009.

We asked respondents an open-ended question on what they thought was the most important problem the country faced. The respondents were free to state any problem and we then grouped them into various categories. By this way, we started identifying national problems way back to 1990 but for the purpose of this chapter we would provide only problems as listed by the respondents from 2004.

Issues have been asked in different ways to answer different questions. Mathes and Pfetsch (1991) who were interested in the Agenda Setting of the alternative press asked what they termed as “counter-issues”. These counter issues are not the routine issues reported by the traditional media but these issues were discerned through “the new social movements.” Mathes and Pfetsch (1991) probed on a single-issue in their longitudinal study. The aim of the study was to see how a non-main stream issue developed over a period of time.

In our deliberation, we considered several concerns arising from the previous studies on Agenda Setting. We do acknowledge that Agenda Setting has been researched by many Western scholars and it is a theory that has captured world-wide attention. Nevertheless, Malaysia offers some new perspectives that are worthwhile to be considered by other scholars.

One concern is on the matter of issues. Shehata and Strombock (2013) had two different measurements of issue importance. One was to evaluate the importance of a series of political issues based on the question: “How important do you consider the following political issues to be (the list contained ten issues including healthcare, education)”. The respondents rated their importance along a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (very important). The Panel B respondents were asked an open-ended question “What do you consider to be the most important political issue today. The answers to the open-ended question were then coded with the issue categories from the Panel A study.

In our study over the past several years we asked respondents an open-ended question to identify what they perceived to be the national problems faced by the nation. The respondents were free to identify whatever issues they thought were national problems. After obtaining the answers we would then group them into categories. Since we had developed 18 categories, we placed the various answers into the respective categories.

From August 2010 till July 2013, economy was no longer the major woe as crime had emerged as the national problem. However, in October 2013 the economy returned as the biggest national issue followed closely by crime and then by social problems. These issues identified by Malaysians are similar to issues in other nations, and they change over a period of time. However, for the purpose of this write-up I wish to highlight on the items in the categories. You might like to call the issue as second level agenda. These are attributes that have changed over the period of time although the categories might remain the same.

Let me illustrate. In March 2008 and October 2008 although the economy was identified as the biggest concern, the items in the categories differed. In July 2012 and 2013, the biggest item was “cost of living” followed by “employment opportunities”. In October



2013, there was a shift with the most important item being “increase in the price of petrol” followed by “high cost of living”.

The role of the new or social media should also be given attention. Early Agenda Setting studies gave attention to the role played by the traditional media but by the 1990s the new media has already made its presence felt in society. In the Malaysian election of 1999, blogs were making their impact. In the subsequent elections and by-elections, new forms of the social media were also being widely used by the politicians in reaching out to the audience or the voters.

Living in a multiracial society we are also aware that the national issues and others affect the different races in a different manner. The public opinion will be able to identify the issues that are national in character and also the issues that affect each community. The language of the newspapers is expected to reflect on the issues of concern to the native speakers of the language.

Was there specific issues of concern to the Chinese or Indian readers that were reflected in the public opinion surveys that we conducted? There definitely must have been concerns specific to any of the communities but they were outside the scope of this workshop.

The concern of media reach or accessibility can be studied better in later workshops to understand how the uneducated with no media access make decisions when they go to the ballot boxes. Do people who have no accessibility to the media and have not paid any attention to the issues become personally involved. Right now, we focus on the media and public agenda within the concept of Agenda Setting and Agenda Building.

These and many other concerns were addressed by the workshop participants held in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia) on 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> February 2015. In their article Aini Maznina A. Manaf, Malia Taibi & Kamaruzzaman Abdul Manan identified the ranking of issues by the mainstream newspapers by comparing them with the issues raised by the Malay language newspapers. They also discussed the overall public agenda in comparison to issues raised by the Malay public agenda.

The article by Chang Peng Kee, Ali Salman, Kho Suet Ni, Mohd Rizal Mohd Yaakop, Rasaq Adisa, & Ong Choong Hong studied two main English newspapers (the Star and the New Straits Times) attempted to understand the issues as part of the media agenda. The English language media agenda were compared to the Malay, Chinese and the Indian public agendas. Siti Haslina, Ganiyu Mutiu Adekunle, Ismail Yusof, Zeti Azreen Ahmad, Hartini Wakichan, & Hazwani Halem analysed the influence of ethnic newspapers in shaping the opinion of Indian and Chinese voters. The article also compared the Chinese Public Agenda and the Indian Public Agenda, to find for differences and similarities.

Scholars talk about agenda setting but participants also raised the possibility of issues that were not raised by the media. Hasmah Zanuddin, Tham Jen Sern, Fauziah Ahmad, Badrul Redzuan Abu Hassan, Julia Wirza Mohd Zawawi, Norliana Hashim & Muhammad Badri Ishak examined what they called the extent of “agenda cutting” being practiced in the newsroom during the election campaign. The article adopted Colistra’s Agenda Cutting Model to study the agenda that were not placed by the Tamil language newspapers during the GE 13.

In all these articles, it becomes plain that there were varied agendas set by the different language newspapers. The different public agendas championed by the Chinese, Indians and the Malays were expressed in varied terms during the country’s 13<sup>th</sup> General

Election. The series of articles illustrate the nature of public agenda for the country as a whole but mindful of agendas held by each race. The different language newspaper had to cater for the interests of their readership and in the process tried to influence segmented public agendas based by race.

A significant discussion was on the agenda cutting that the article pointed should also be of major concern among scholars of Agenda Setting. The media do set the agendas but can they also withhold agendas if they decide, for reasons known to the editorial staff, not to portray the news for the consumption of the general public. Can the media also function as a gatekeeper of agendas in the overall study on agenda setting?

#### BIODATA

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