

The Agenda Setting Function of English Newspapers during the 13th General Election

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ABSTRACT

It is opined that the mass media forces attention on certain issues by constantly projecting them and suggesting its audiences to think about them. This article attempts to focus on the Agenda Setting function of English news media in Malaysia during the 13th GE13 employing quantitative content analysis. Two English newspapers were analyzed, namely The Star and New Straits Times with 1362 news items identified. In order to gauge the public agenda, quantitative survey were done three times in the months of February, March and April 2013 respectively leading up to the election on 5th of May, 2013. The study found out that the agenda setting function of the English newspapers is important in transferring issue salience and issue attributes to their audiences. Individuals who highly rely on news from the media shall be likely influenced by the Agenda Setting effect of the media. There was no significant relationship between the English newspapers and the public agenda of the main ethnic groups in Malaysia. Hence, the public agenda of the Malays, Chinese and Indians have no significant relationship with the English Newspapers. Future studies could employ a qualitative approach in order to find answers to the reasons for lack of relationship between the English newspapers and ethnic public agenda.

Keywords: *Agenda setting, english newspapers, New Straits Times, 13th general election, Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

The function of Agenda Setting pragmatically manifests the power of mass media in shaping public opinion (McCombs, 2014) via transferring the issue salience (1st level of Agenda Setting) and the issue attribution (2nd level of Agenda Setting) to media audience.

Lang and Lang (1966) opined that the mass media forced attention on certain issues by constantly projecting some selective subject and suggesting its audiences to think about them, know about them and having feelings about them. This was in line with the 'incisive opinion', a term coined by Cohen (1963), in showing the stunning success of the press in telling its audiences what to think about.

The importance of mass media in the political scenario is evident. Voters gleaned large amount of information from the media during the election campaign (Cohen, 1963), with the well-educated and most politically interested actively seeking information (McComb & Shaw, 1972). Those with the greatest mass media exposure are most likely to know where the candidates stand on different issues (Berelson, Lazarsfeld & McPhee, 1954).

Weaver (1977) categorized three factors to determine what type of message a person would attend and followed by the level of message perceived i.e (i) *interest in the message content*; (ii) *uncertainty about the subject of the message*; (iii) *effort required to attend to the message*. In search of these uncertainties, McCombs and Weaver (1973) had incorporated the concept of need for orientation that combined two main elements i.e. relevance and uncertainty. They presumed that each individual, physically and mentally, needs to be familiar with his/her surroundings. The different levels of need for orientation shall cause the different "effectiveness" of newspaper editorial endorsement (Westley & Barrow, 1959; McCombs, 1967).

McCombs and Weaver (1973) were of the opinion that the increased need for orientation would lead to increase in media used and this resulted in Agenda Setting effect by the media. The Agenda Setting function of the English newspapers is important in transferring the issue salience and issue attribute to their audiences. Those individuals who very much rely on the news information from the media shall likely be influenced by the Agenda Setting effect of the media. This chapter attempts to focus the Agenda Setting function of English news media mainly News Straits Times (NST) and The Star (TS) in Malaysia during the 13th GE13.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Role of the English Newspapers in Malaysia

The development of English news media in Malaysia can be traced back to the colonial era where the purpose of the publication was purely to serve the needs of the British colonial rulers during the days of the Federation of Malaya or *Tanah Melayu*. Though the English newspapers have been in existence here for over one and a half century, the drift of time has not changed much of the traits of its readers who are mainly well-educated, professionals, foreigners as well as expatriates and etc. The English newspaper readers often use English as their main communication medium.

Malaysia is a heterogeneous nation, accommodating various ethnicities mainly Malay, Chinese, Indian etc. The tolerance policy that adopted by the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) government has permitted each of the ethnic groups to uphold their own mother tongue, religion, and

customs and culture. Therefore, it is not surprising to see the publication of newspapers in different languages to serve the needs of different ethnic groups here.

The ethnicity overtone, however, is not reflected in the English newspapers where it has successfully transcended across the different races. It is mainly due to the fact its readers are well-educated and that they have mastered other languages other than their mother tongue.

Looking deep into the context of Malaysian newspaper reading behaviour, it is easy to understand that those who have mastered multi languages (inclusive English language) will tend to flick two or more newspapers in seeking information. As such, the English newspapers remain highly significant here. Moreover, for non-pure English medium readers they provide an additional channel of news to satisfy those readers who seek a different reporting perspective.

There are dozens of English newspapers published in Malaysia covering all perspectives to serve the different needs of audiences. Nonetheless, the English print media in Malaysia is dominated by two major players, i.e. New Straits Times (NST) and The Star (TS). Both of these mainstream newspapers were established in two different centuries and have witnessed the difference stages of the country's development.

New Straits Times (NST)

New Straits Times (NST) is one of the oldest English language newspapers in Malaysia. Founded as The Straits Times in 1845 during the British colonial rule, it was re-established in 1974 as The New Straits Times (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Straits_Times). The first publication of NST was in the traditional broadsheet format which continued for about 160 years and subsequently reformatted to the tabloid size in 2005. In 2011, the NST appeared with a new look of its masthead, typography, contents and logo in order to meet the market needs and changing aspirations of the readers.

The growth of NST had inadvertently given a strong countenance to sustain the nationalistic movement in the mid-19th century that ended with Malaya's independence in 1957. The paper also recorded the road to the establishment of Malaysia in 1963. Presently, the NST is part of Media Prima group of companies and serves as a pro government newspaper. The last reported circulation was about 74,711 as of Jan – June 2014 (ABC Malaysia).

The Star

The Star is presently the English language tabloid newspaper with the biggest circulation in Malaysia. The circulation figure was reported to be 291,068 for the period January-June 2014 (ABC Malaysia). It started off in 1971 in Penang as the regional newspaper mainly covering the northern region of Malaysia before going national in 1976 when it set up its new office in Kuala Lumpur ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Star_\(Malaysia\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Star_(Malaysia))). The Star is a pro government newspaper with its majority stake owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), one of the major component parties of Barisan Nasional (BN) representing the Malaysian Chinese. The daily is also a member of the Asia News Network.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda Setting

Media constitutes an important factor in the development of the nation. It displays this power of importance succinctly through setting the agenda for audience and policy makers. Agenda Setting is the ability of the media to make certain issues appear important in the minds of the public and influence public debate and policy direction. Griffin (2012) observes that the media predetermines issues that are regarded as important at a particular time in a particular society. Through presentation, the press directs, moulds, guides peoples' mind and indirectly affects what people talk about and their behaviour.

The Agenda Setting as a mass media theory emanated from the Agenda Setting hypothesis of Walter Lippman (1922) who in his famous book "Public Opinion" noted that the press influences people through Agenda Setting in its reportage of events. Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008) note that "this theory (Agenda Setting) is good at explaining why people with similar media exposure place importance on the same issues although different people may feel differently about the issue at hand, most people feel the same issues are important".

Through its numerous contents, the media is said to set the agenda (Colistra, 2012) for the audience and these agenda influences the audience's behavior, perception, policy direction of the government and other decision makers. Like other mass communication media, newspapers inform, educate and entertain readers. Media can make use of all components of a newspaper to create disaster awareness, disseminate information on prevention and educate people. According to Yassin & Zanuddin (2012), the media set agenda through its reportage and this affects how people perceive political actors and issues. By doing this the image of political figure is presented to the public to assist them to make electoral decision.

The newspaper components are news, features, interviews, editorial, photographs, opinion and column, letters to the editor, cartoon/caricature and adverts. In the 2013 General Election (GE13), English newspapers through their coverage and content set the public agenda.

The Role of English Newspapers in Agenda Setting

Malaysia is a multi-racial and multi-language nation. There are predominantly three ethnic groups in Malaysia – Malays, Chinese and Indians - and correspondingly three major languages, namely, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. As newspapers are medium of transmission of culture, mobilization and participation in the affairs of the society, there are numerous indigenous language newspapers in existence in Malaysia.

However, English newspapers are also in existence to cater for the interest of the educated indigenous and international communities in Malaysia. English newspapers in Malaysia include The Star, News Strait Times, Malay Mail, The Sun Daily, The Edge, New Sabah Times, Daily Express, Borneo Post, Rakyat Post and others (Malaysian Newspapers Online, 2015). As they are published in an international language, English newspapers dismantled ethnic and language barrier. They have a broad-based audience comprising of local and international communities.

Azlan, Rahim, Basri and Hasim (2012), and Idid and Chang (2012) underscored the importance of newspapers in setting agenda in a democratic society. Before and during the election, English newspapers in Malaysia through their reportages of the political activities had

set the agenda for politicians and electorate. Like their ethnic newspaper counterparts, the English newspapers brought out some salient issues to the public domain. Some issues brought to the fore during the 2013 election by the media were from education, health, and security among others.

English Newspaper Agenda Setting Role in Elections

The election period is a testing period not only for the politicians but for media and all stakeholders. It is a delicate moment whereby media needs to be responsible and responsive in discharging its professional duties. Basically, the media informs and educates people on the political activities.

As reported by the New Straits Times on December 20, 2010, the Prime Minister of Malaysia Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Tun Razak observed that media had to play three main roles; serve as a watch tower for change; act as a catalyst for development and promote moderation (Ibrahim, Kee & Chwee, 2012). Unlike the ethnic media which promotes ethnic interest, English newspapers are expected to promote larger interest and set agenda for national development. While promoting the programmes and interest of politicians, the agenda for the overall development of the country needs to be the priority of the media.

Furthermore, Kiang, Ahmad, Ibrahim & Kee (2012), note that the news item's placement in media is an "active forces of order that bracket out certain happening via routinised, legitimised and institutionalised structure that favour certain ways of seeing." Also, Folarin (2002) notes that the press set agenda through these four concepts: the quality and frequency of reporting; prominence given to the report through headline display, pictures and layout of newspapers; cumulative media-specific effects over time and the degree of conflict generated in the reports.

CONTENDING QUESTIONS ON AGENDA SETTING

What are the Agenda Setting functions of mass media? Why is it that certain issues rank high during election and not others? The issue of how a political agenda is set has been studied in a series of different contexts and with the aid of a number of different theoretical approaches. This paper has primarily focused on "agenda-setting" rather than its opposite. However, briefly, we must also try to understand the opposite in order to understand more about Agenda Setting functions.

Agenda Setting Functions of Mass media

Agenda Setting pioneer McCombs and Shaw argued that media people play an important part in shaping political reality (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Agenda Setting came with the idea that the media don't tell people what to think but how to think about (Baran & Davis, 2006). In their recent work McCombs and Ghanem (2011) explain that Agenda Setting operates at different levels. At first level the media teach people on what to think about and at second level it teaches on how to think about. Rubin and Haridakis (2001) share similar views, and McCombs' work here strengthens his Framing theory.

During an election, voters make decisions after digesting huge amounts of information from the media. Lang and Lang (1966) observed relationship between media Agenda Setting and public Agenda Setting. Media Agenda setting forces attention toward certain issues. In Malaysia social media, for example, have been influential in keeping important political issues in the forefront in the last five years prior to the 2013 elections. The social media, especially Facebook and twitter played an important role in shaping public opinion on important political matters (Ali Salman et al, 2016).

Issues Ranked High During Election

Similar questions could be asked whether it is necessary and how far issues ranked high on the media agenda correlates with ranking of issues in the public agenda. Explanation similar to agenda deleting in Media studies could also be found in other discipline of study such as Political Science. Perhaps it is most succinctly stated by Tallberg (2001) as he briefly discusses three different ways of influencing the agenda-setting process: “Agenda Setting,” “agenda obstruction,” and “agenda structuring.” Tallberg’s collective term for these is “agenda shaping.” Tallberg’s category of “agenda obstruction” refers to attempts to actively prevent an issue from appearing on the agenda and is related to Hinnfors’ agenda-setting theory (1995) as well as to the theory of non-decision making (Svärd 1982).

Furthermore, theories, or rather fragments of theories on agenda-setting politics (“Agenda Setting”) may be categorised as problem-focused, actor-focused, and focused on exogenous factors (Robinson, 2000).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In order to understand the media agenda that was provided by the English newspapers, this study employed the methodology of quantitative content analysis. Two English newspapers were analyzed, namely The Star and New Straits Times with 1362 news items identified. The unit of analysis took in any news that was related to the 13th General Election. The inter-coder reliability was tested and it was above 0.7. Spearman correlation was used for the analysis to see the rank order correlation between public and media agenda. Seventeen issues were identified as agenda for both the public and the media. In order to gauge the public agenda, quantitative survey was done three times in the month of February, March and April 2013 respectively leading up to the election on 5th of May, 2013. The quantitative survey drew questions from the classic studies of McCombs and Shaw such as asking the respondents to rate what was the most pressing issue at that time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 1,362 news items was collected from the two English dailies relevant to the Malaysian General Elections 2013. The majority of the news items came from *New Straits Times* (52.1%) and followed by *The Star* (47.9%). The data collection process took 17 days of coverage starting from the nomination day on 20 April 2013 to a day after polling, which fell on 5 May 2013. From Table 1, showing the units of analysis attributed to the research period, the peak of coverage for elections was on the eve of polling day, the critical moment when the voters had to decide before casting their votes on the following day.

In the following data presentation, the 1,362 items obtained from both English dailies were combined for the subsequent analyses. Firstly, the source of news for English media, which was just the same like some other language newspapers were mainly attributed from the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) (36.6%) and the Government agencies (16.4%). Despite that, the opposition alliance Pakatan Rakyat was also given space (16.6%) to voice out through this channel. However, if to compare with the overall data, comprising the coverage of Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English newspapers, the space given to Barisan Nasional is relatively greater (overall: 31.9%) and is relatively lesser (overall: 21.5%) for Pakatan Rakyat. Meanwhile, looking at non-political sources, English newspapers give more room to readers to voice their opinion (English: 5.0% vs. Overall: 1.6%). On the other hand, the space given to NGO is the least at 1.9% only as compared with Overall: 3.2%. The Editorial source attributed to 14.5% which is quite close to the Overall 15.2%. The other 9.0% are from other sources like event reporting and sources not belonging to the above categories.

Table 1: Unit of Analysis

Date (Day)	The Star	New Straits Times	Overall	Per cent
April 20 (Saturday)	48	49	97	7.1
April 21 (Sunday)	45	46	91	6.7
April 22 (Monday)	41	51	92	6.8
April 23 (Tuesday)	37	42	79	5.8
April 24 (Wednesday)	44	50	94	6.9
April 25 (Thursday)	40	46	86	6.3
April 26 (Friday)	55	36	91	6.7
April 27 (Saturday)	40	32	72	5.3
April 28 (Sunday)	20	27	47	3.5
April 29 (Monday)	23	34	57	4.2
April 30 (Tuesday)	41	41	82	6.0
May 1 (Wednesday)	40	32	72	5.3
May 2 (Thursday)	38	54	92	6.8
May 3 (Friday)	27	28	55	4.0
May 4 (Saturday)	48	65	113	8.3
May 5 (Sunday)	21	34	55	4.0
May 6 (Monday)	45	42	87	6.4
Total	653	709	1,362	100.0

Table 2: Per centage of News Source

Source	Overall (N=8096)	English (n=1362)
Barisan Nasional	31.9	36.6
Pakatan Rakyat	21.5	16.6
Government	16.9	16.4
Editorial	15.2	14.5
NGO	3.2	1.9
Readers	1.6	5.0
Others	9.8	9.0

The next is to look at the news slant in what way the newspapers skewed the stories. From Table 3, we could see that they were mostly pro-Barisan Nasional when came to reporting about the 13th General Election with 28.2% of the coverage in the English Newspapers were positive towards Barisan Nasional. When came to the coverage for Government agencies, mainly was reported in a neutral manner (25.7%). It was relatively balanced for the coverage of PR even though negative coverage for this opposition alliance is slightly higher at 13.7% vis-à-vis neutral to PR (8.5%) and positive to PR (7.2%). Overall, the almost same pattern applied to all newspapers from other languages.

Table 3: Per centage of News Slant

Slant	Overall (N=8096)	English (n=1362)
Neutral to Government	25.1	25.7
Positive to Government	5.7	4.9
Negative to Government	2.4	0.9
Neutral to Barisan Nasional	7.5	9.9
Positive to Barisan Nasional	23.4	28.2
Negative to Barisan Nasional	4.3	1.0
Neutral to Pakatan Rakyat	7.7	8.5
Positive to Pakatan Rakyat	10.3	7.2
Negative to Pakatan Rakyat	13.7	13.7

Once the cross-tabulation on news source and news slant was conducted on the English newspapers, the researchers had a clearer picture on the reporting as exhibited in Table 4. It has shown two extremes by the BN and PR sources. BN source is mainly praising its coalition parties (53.4%) and attacking the opposing PR (13.7%), besides presenting facts about its party members and staying neutral (19.5%). However, this is not the same scenario for PR as it barely had a chance to attack BN (only 4.4%) with BN having a better chance to antagonize PR (20.8%). Despite of this, the PR source managed to sneak to portray a positive picture on its alliance (33.6%) and also stay neutral (33.2%).

As for the Government source, it had used the space mainly for telling neutral facts about its agencies (52.5%) and also sometime paid tribute to itself (13.5%). Nonetheless, some Government agencies did criticize the opposing PR (15.7%) and praised the ruling BN (7.2%). All the Editorial, NGO, and Reader sources had shown the same pattern too in news slants. Firstly, all are neutral to Government (Editorial: 42.3%; NGO: 50.0%; Reader: 51.5%), followed by praising or showing positive side of the ruling BN (Editorial: 28.1%; NGO: 27.8%; Reader: 11.8%), and also antagonizing the opposing PR (Editorial: 8.7%; NGO: 11.1%; Reader: 11.8%).

Table 4: Cross-tabulation of News Source and News Slant

Source \ Slant	BN (n=498)	PR (n=226)	Govt (n=223)	Edit (n=196)	NGO (n=18)	Reader (n=68)
Neutral to Government	5.4*	5.3	52.5	42.3	50.0	51.5
Positive to Government	4.2	0.9	13.5	3.1	5.6	0
Negative to Government	0.2	0.4	1.8	1.0	0	4.4
Neutral to BN	19.5	0.9	4.9	7.1	0	5.9
Positive to BN	53.4	4.4	7.2	28.1	27.8	11.8

Negative to BN	1.4	0.4	0.9	0	0	1.5
Neutral to PR	2.0	33.2	1.3	6.1	0	7.4
Positive to PR	0.2	33.6	2.2	3.6	5.6	5.9
Negative to PR	13.7	20.8	15.7	8.7	11.1	11.8

*Note: Figures indicate per cent within News Source

After getting the grasp on how English newspapers slanted the stories with the attributions of various news sources, another objective of this paper was to examine their agenda or the issues being highlighted during the election campaign period. The sequence is exhibited in Table 5, which the top 10 issues portrayed were Political Campaign, Religion, Leadership, Development, Economy, National Security, Government Administration, Traffic Woes, Crime, and Environment. However, this was not the case when coming to the public agenda of various ethnic groups. The public, regardless of ethnicities, ranked Crime as their top agenda but for the English media Crime was at the ninth spot as their perceived most important problem then. The public's second concern was Social issue which was only ranked as eleventh by the English newspapers. Economy, the third public concern, was not too far away from the media agenda that ranked the same concern at fifth placing.

While the English media ranked Political campaign at the top, the Malays and Indians only found it fit to be ranked at the fourth placing while the Chinese placed it further down at number six. The English media ranked Religious issue at number two, yet failed to influence the public as it was only ranked eighth by Indians, eleventh by Malays, and almost last by the Chinese. Likewise, the same scenario happened to the third ranked Leadership features of politicians in the English newspapers. It was ranked low by all ethnic groups, in which the Malays ranked it at eight, Chinese at twelve, and the Indians appeared totally indifferent to this and found it fit to be ranked at the bottom. Meanwhile, the media's fourth ranked Development issue which was also hardly noticed by the Indians ranked low by Malays at thirteenth place and Chinese at a moderate ranking of eight. The matching of these ranking of issues by English media and public agenda of various ethnic groups can be examined in Table 5.

Table 5: English Media Agenda VS. Public Agenda of Various Ethnic Groups

Issue	English Media (n=1,362)	Malay Public (n=723)	Chinese Public (n=618)	Indian Public (N=122)
Politics/Campaign	1	4	6	4
Religion	2	11	16.5	8
Leadership	3	8	12	14
Development	4	13	8	14
Economy	5.5	3	3	3
National security	5.5	6	7	7
Govt. Administration	7.5	14	9	14
Traffic woes	7.5	15	14	10
Crime	9.5	1	1	1
Environment	9.5	5	4	5
Social	11	2	2	2
Education	12.5	12	11	9
National unity	12.5	10	5	6
Health issues	14	9	13	14

Immigrants	16	7	10	14
Nationalism	16	16.5	15	14
International Relations	16	16.5	16.5	14

Note: Figures indicate the ranking of issue

If we look at the rank-order placed by the Malaysian public from the different ethnicities, the Spearman's Rank Order Correlations have shown that their opinions were quite similar in which the significant Coefficients of Correlations were produced, i.e. $r_{M,C} = .808$, $r_{M,I} = .767$, and $r_{C,I} = .672$. Nonetheless, as shown in Table 6, the English media agenda did not match with the public agenda at the 95% confidence level as the p levels were all above .05. Their Coefficients of Correlations were as low as $r_{E,M} = .276$, $r_{E,C} = .180$, and $r_{E,I} = .282$. Hence, there was no significant relationship between the English newspapers and the public agenda of the main ethnic groups - Malays, Chinese and Indians - in Malaysia. This could be due to the fact that the various ethnicities have their own vernacular newspapers in circulation. Matters, which are pertinent and of interest to the various ethnics are mainly highlighted in these newspapers.

Table 6: Coefficients of Correlations of Media-Public Agenda

			Malay Public	Chinese Public	Indian Public
Spearman's rho	English Media	Pearson	.276	.180	.282
		Correlation			
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.142	.245	.136
		N	17	17	17

CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the Agenda Setting function of the English newspapers in Malaysia, New Straits Times (NST) and The Star (TS) during the 13th General Election. The Agenda Setting function of the English newspapers is important in transferring the issue salience and issue attribute to their audiences. Those individuals who highly rely on the news from the media shall be likely influenced by the Agenda Setting effect of the media. The source of news for English media, which is just the same like some of the vernacular newspapers were mainly attributed from the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) and the Government agencies. Despite that, the opposition alliance Pakatan Rakyat was also given limited space to voice out through this channel. However, if to compare with the overall data, comprising the coverage of Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English newspapers, the space given to Barisan Nasional is relatively greater and to Pakatan Rakyat is relatively lesser. There is also no significant relationship between the English newspapers and the public agenda of the main ethnic groups in Malaysia. Hence, the public agenda of the Malays, Chinese and Indians have no significant relationship with the English Newspapers. Since this study is quantitative, future studies could employ a qualitative approach in order to find answers to the reasons for lack of relationship between the English newspapers and ethnic public agenda.

BIODATA

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