

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND AGENDA SETTING: IMPLICATIONS ON POLITICAL AGENDA**

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### **Abstract**

Since the advent of the Internet, political information is now at the fingertips of every Malaysian, especially those living in the urban areas and having access to the Internet. One does not need to have the traditional media such as radio, television or Newspaper to understand what is happening in political set up in Malaysia these days. This is because the social media, especially Facebook and twitter have made access to information so easy to the larger population. The aim of this paper is to explore the role of social media as agenda setting mechanisms in the Malaysia political scenario. The study uses secondary data sources to obtain insight on the issue. It is evident from literature that the social media, especially the social media (eg. Facebook) play an important role in shaping public opinion on important political matters. The social media has been used by the public to express their concern and grievance on issues that concern their welfare which the traditional media may not dare to report or broadcast. Agenda setting needs to be relooked

into as the public agenda is taking a central stage through the new/social media. Thus, it implies, the agenda setting model could be extended or remodeled to include the new/social media due to their influence on public agenda. Further implication of this is that politicians should keep abreast with the development in the social media so that they will understand current issues that are of great concern to the people and the society at large. We have to come to terms with the fact that we are now in the digital and globalised era, hence agenda setting needs to be relooked into as the public agenda is taking a central stage through the social media.

**Keywords:** Social media, social media, agenda setting, Malaysia, political scenario, public agenda, political agenda

## **MEDIA SOSIAL DAN PENETAPAN AGENDA: IMPLIKASI TERHADAP AGENDA POLITIK**

### **Abstrak**

Sejak kedatangan Internet, maklumat politik kini di hujung jari setiap rakyat Malaysia, terutamanya mereka yang tinggal di kawasan bandar dan mempunyai akses kepada Internet. Seseorang tidak perlu mempunyai media tradisional seperti radio, televisyen atau akhbar untuk memahami apa yang berlaku di medan politik di Malaysia hari ini. Ini kerana media sosial, terutamanya Facebook dan Twitter telah membuat akses kepada maklumat begitu mudah untuk penduduk yang lebih besar. Tujuan makalah ini adalah untuk meninjau peranan media sosial sebagai mekanisme menetapkan agenda dalam senario politik Malaysia. Kajian ini menggunakan sumber data sekunder untuk mendapatkan pandangan mengenai isu itu. Ia adalah jelas daripada kesusasteraan bahawa media sosial, khususnya Facebook memainkan peranan penting dalam membentuk pendapat awam mengenai perkara politik yang penting. Media sosial telah digunakan oleh orang ramai untuk menyatakan kebimbangan dan rungutan mereka mengenai isu-isu yang melibatkan kebijakan mereka yang media tradisional tidak mungkin berani melaporkan

atau siaran. penetapan Agenda perlu dikaji semula kerana agenda awam mengambil tempat utama melalui media baru / sosial. Oleh itu, ia menunjukkan, model penetapan agenda boleh dilanjutkan atau diubahsuai untuk memasukkan media baru / sosial akibat pengaruh mereka dalam agenda awam. Implikasi selanjutnya adalah bahawa ahli-ahli politik perlu sentiasa mengikuti perkembangan dalam media sosial supaya mereka memahami isu-isu semasa yang menjadi perhatian besar kepada rakyat dan masyarakat pada umumnya. Kita perlu terima hakikat bahawa kita kini berada dalam era digital dan globalisasi, maka penetapan agenda perlu dikaji semula kerana agenda awam main peranan penting melalui media sosial.

***Kata kunci:** Media sosial, penetapan agenda, Malaysia, senario politik, agenda awam, agenda politik.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Attempts to develop the computer have started as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the formulation of an internet network is said to have began in 1956, where credits were given to a McLuhan follower, psychologist Joseph C. R. Licklider (Baran, 2009). Licklider seemed to have already envisioned the utilization of internet as a political tool. He wrote, “The political process would essentially be a giant teleconference, and a campaign would be a months-long series of communications among candidates, propagandists, commentators, political action groups, and voters.” He added that the key to this would be “a good console and a good network to a good computer” (Baran, 2009). Thus the invention of the internet which ensued after computer experts strived to make Licklider’s vision a reality.

Following the advent of the Internet, in recent years, this social media had also been utilized for political purposes. The nature of the social media in which people have access, gives opportunity to all political rivals to take advantage of and use for their own political agendas, which is made possible by employing the agenda setting techniques.

The agenda setting theory claimed that media do not really influence what we think, but rather set our minds on what to think about (Baran 2009). In 1972, Maxwell McCombs

and Donald Shaw insisted that the media plays an important part in shaping political reality by determining the ‘importance’ of certain issues through “the amount of information in a news story and its position” (Baran 2009). This proved that media had long been used as a tool for setting political agenda.

The proponent of Agenda Setting theory, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, in 1972 noted that “the agenda is not *what to think* but *what to think about*. Mass media have the ability to transfer the salience (most important) of items on their news agendas to the public agenda” (McCombs and Shaw, 1974). “We look to news professionals for signals on where to focus our attention. We judge as important what the media judge as important” (McCombs & Shaw, 1974).

One of the aspects in the concept of an agenda-setting role of mass communication is the time frame for this phenomenon. Also, different media have different agenda-setting potential. Agenda-setting theory seems quite appropriate to help us understand the pervasive role of the media (for example on political communication systems).

The objective of this concept paper is to explore the role of social media as public and political agenda setting mechanisms in the Malaysian political scenario and in doing so the paper will also trace some of the other challenges pose by social media. Hence, in addition secondary data sources to obtain an insight on the issue, the paper traced the use of social media in the 2008 and 2013 Malaysian General Elections.

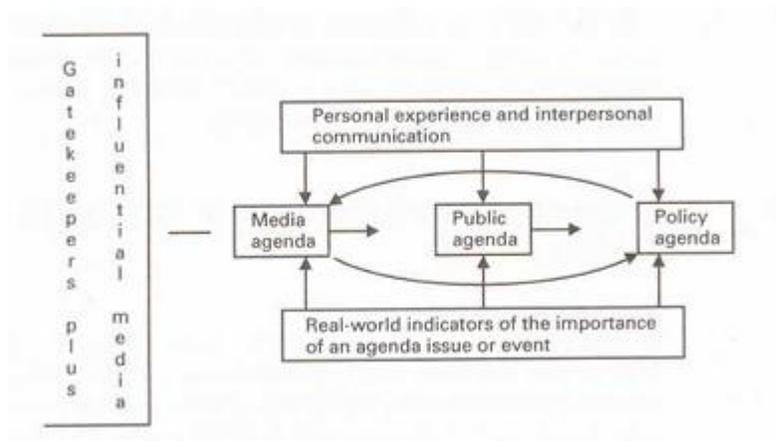
## **THE AGENDA SETTING THEORY**

Agenda setting describes a very powerful influence of the media – the ability to tell us what issues are important. As far back as 1922, the newspaper columnist Walter Lippman was concerned that the media had the power to present images to the public. McCombs and Shaw investigated presidential campaigns in 1968, 1972 and 1976. In the research done in 1968 they focused on two elements: awareness and information. Investigating the agenda-setting function of the mass media, they attempted to assess the relationship between what voters in one community said were important issues and the actual content of the media messages used during the campaign. McCombs and Shaw

concluded that the mass media exerted a significant influence on what voters considered to be the major issues of the campaign (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The core assumptions and statements is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media. Two basis assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: (1) the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it; (2) media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. One of the most critical aspects in the concept of an agenda-setting role of mass communication is the time frame for this phenomenon. In addition, different media have different agenda-setting potential. Agenda-setting theory seems quite appropriate to help us understand the pervasive role of the media (for example on political communication systems). Bernard Cohen (1963) stated: “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.”

### Conceptual Model



Source: McQuail & Windahl (1993)

Just as McCombs and Shaw have expanded their focus over the years on the theory, other researchers have extended investigations of agenda setting to issues including history, advertising, foreign, and medical news. This paper through secondary sources will investigate the role of social media on public agenda. At present social media has become the platform for sharing and getting information.

## **Network Readiness and the political scenario in Malaysia**

Malaysia’s networked readiness is encouraging as depicted in Table 1, especially the government usage of the Internet is among the highest in the world. The government usage of the Internet commensurate with political usage of the Internet in the 2013 General Elections as this study has shown. The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), the National Coalition government was very much aware of the political impact and influence of the social media. In February 2013, two-and-half months before Malaysia’s 13<sup>th</sup> general elections (GE13), Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak was quoted widely in the media that the country will experience its first “social media election”(Zahid, 2013). The significance of his remarks lies in the exponential growth of social media users in Malaysia over the preceding five years. During the previous election in 2008, there were 800,000 Facebook and 3,429 Twitter users in Malaysia. However, by 2013 these numbers had increased to 13,220,000 for Facebook and 2,000,000 for Twitter users (Gomez, 2013).

Table 1 Networked Readiness Index 2013

	<b>Malaysia’s Ranking</b>	Countries Ranked No. 1
Political and regulatory environment	24	Singapore
Business and innovation environment	16	Singapore
Infrastructure and digital content	73	Iceland
Affordability	50	India

Skills	43	Finland
Individual usage	46	Denmark
Business usage	26	Switzerland
Government usage	7	Singapore
Economic impacts	29	Finland
Social impacts	25	Singapore

Muhyiddin said it was a pleasure to note Malaysia had been consistent in the Scorecard, being in the top three positions in the past few years. Malaysia's broadband penetration rate reached 67% since September compared to just 22% in 2008 (Spykerman, 2013). Since the last general elections in 2008, Malaysia's internet penetration had consistently risen year by year. Total internet penetration in Malaysia rose from 15,868,000 in 2008 to 17,723,000. The rise in internet penetration also pointed towards how Malaysians were accessing their news. According to the Malaysian Digital Association's (MDA) February 2012 report, websites of the mainstream media, such as thestar.com.my, utusan.com.my and bharian.com.my, collected 2,221,763, 1,171,578 and 769,772 unique browsers respectively. Alternative news websites such as malaysiakini.com and themalaysianinsider.com collected 1,858,649 and 1,117,124 unique browsers respectively in the same period, demonstrating strongly their comparative strength (Gomez, 2013).

With satisfactory network readiness, the use of internet and social media in particular in Malaysia for political purposes has seen an increase prior to and during the 2013 General Elections. Hence with the advent of the Internet, political information is now at the fingertips of every Malaysian, especially those who are politically minded and having access to the Internet. These days, one does not need to have the traditional media such as radio, television or Newspaper to understand what is happening in the political arena in Malaysia. This is because social media, especially Facebook and twitter have made access to information so easy to the larger population.

## **Challenges pose by social media**

The advent of the Internet and its related application, especially web 2.0 has tremendously changed the way we interact and do things. The dawn of social media has brought challenges to the way news is diffused in a social system. Over the years, social media has impacted almost every aspect of our lives in different ways and governments have begun to worry over what this impact might bring. That said, of late, there have been calls for putting some kind of control on the Internet due to cases involving demonstrations and protests where Social Media (SM) was blamed as the cause.

2009 saw opposition supporters took to Twitter after traditional media were banned from covering the anti-government protests and its crackdown by the Ahmadinejad-led government. Dubbed the “Twitter Revolution”, everyone became a reporter to update about the protests on Twitter (Vivian 2011).

In June 2013, Gezi Park, in Istanbul experienced a mass protest. Claiming media blackout by the Turkish government, protesters used social media not only to express their opinions, but also to spread information regarding the protests which were purportedly concealed by the government-controlled traditional media. Facebook and Twitter had been used to provide news update on the protests, and photos and videos said to be of the protests were circulated on Flickr, Tumblr and YouTube (Hutchinson 2013).

In the United Kingdom (UK), for instance, following the London riots, SM was blamed by the government for inciting and fuelling the riots. This became serious because the rioters were simply seen as looters and they were mainly teenagers and young adults who were just out to loot and create unnecessary unrest. Following the riots, the House of Commons’s shadow secretary of culture, Ivan Lewis, said that the house, “supports the government’s decision to undertake a review of whether measures are necessary to prevent the abuse of social media by those who organize and participate in criminal activities (Halliday and Garside, 2011).”

There were other similar attempts such as the one by UK Home Secretary, Theresa May, who was scheduling meetings with Facebook, Twitter and Research In Motion (RIM) to "discuss their responsibilities in this area." Suggestions have ranged from banning suspected rioters from social

media networks to the wholesale shutdown of social media in times of unrest without regard to individual freedoms in order to "catch the bad guys (Rutledge, 2011)."

In a Thursday speech to Parliament, the British Prime Minister David Cameron remarked, "Everyone watching these horrific actions will be struck by how they were organized via SM. Free flow of information can be used for good. But it can also be used for ill. And when people are using social media for violence, we need to stop them." The crust of the matter is based on the premise that people should not and cannot use SM to create unrest. Therefore, the Prime Minister reiterate the government and the police are going "to look at whether it would be right to stop people communicating via these websites and services when we know they are plotting violence, disorder and criminality." The Prime Ministers received the backing of even the opposition Labour Party on the matter. For Ivan Lewis, the Labour Party's shadow secretary of culture in the House of Commons, "Free speech is central to our democracy, but so is public safety and security. We support the government's decision to undertake a review of whether measures are necessary to prevent the abuse of social media by those who organize and participate in criminal activities (Mick, 2011)."

### **Political Agenda**

Agenda setting scholars, largely, agree on how to measure the public and the media agenda. However, as Dearing and Rogers (1996, p. 18) state, "... measures of the policy agenda vary from study to study much more than do measures of the media agenda and the public agenda which are fairly standard." Defining and measuring the political agenda is the complicated choice to be made. Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) argue that there is no such thing as the political agenda but only an archipelago of different loosely associated political agendas. In other words all political actors have their own agenda; some even have several agendas that are more or less independent from one another.

From literature, it is adequate to note that most studies were limited to one or two political agendas. Only the work of Protess (Protess et al., 1987, 1991) and Soroka (2002) considered more than two political agendas simultaneously. Limiting the political agenda to the agenda of one or two political actors artificially reduces the scope of politics and, more importantly, makes it impossible to control for effects between political agendas. If political agendas are affecting each other, and there is every reason to expect them to do so, picking out one political agenda and associating it with media coverage discards important inter-political agenda setting effects.

A political agenda is a set of issues and policies laid out by ideological or political groups; as well as topics under discussion by a governmental executive, or a cabinet in government that tries to influence current and near-future political news and debate (Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981).

The political arena will see an increasing use of social media in the future, where old social custom approach to reaching the masses will no longer be feasible. Social media have over the years become an influencer and game changer of any political party. Unlike traditional campaigning, which is mandatorily required to come to a close some hours before the polls, the election commission cannot put a ban on discourse on social networking website. Hence, currently social media should be seen as a life line for political parties to achieve their political agenda. Be it twitter, Facebook or blog, politicians can no longer ignore social media in reaching out to their supporters and the masses at large.

### **Social media as mechanism for public and political agenda**

The very nature of the social media which makes creating and sharing news so easy, couple with its viral nature facilitate political news sharing and any news for that matter very fast with a wider reach. Bimber (2003) powerfully demonstrates that the Internet has greatly reduced the entry costs for campaigners wanting to influence the political process. As such, there is a weakening of established political parties and an opening up of politics to those adept at website design and driven by a commitment to change.

A study by Kulikova and Perlmutter (2007) on the impact and significance of an advocacy blog linked to the 'tulip revolution' in Kyrgyzstan found that blogs had become a unique and rich source of information not available from other local sources or world press. They suggest that samizdat (unofficial) blogs can serve to incite or sustain democratization in Third World countries, even those undergoing uneven economic development. In other words agenda setting these days is not necessarily from the authorities or ruling elites, not from gatekeepers and stakeholders of news corporations. We are experiencing what some termed as public agenda whereby the opinion of the public is at a central stage and discussion, especially political discussion, is centred around the opinion of the public via the social media (social media in particular).

The conventional media is no longer having full control on agenda setting over the masses. This is due to the pervasiveness of the social media which provides access to the masses and makes it easier for anyone to create and share news. Thanks to web 2.0 which makes this possible. Hence, the social media is losing its grip as far as agenda setting is concern, especially political agenda. Since the 2008 GE the social media has been at the forefront of setting the political agenda. News reported or shared via the social media have become the talking point of the day and this made some observers to believe that the social media is no longer an alternative media as it used to be, but rather mainstream media by way making news headlines. This is obvious in the way social media, especially Facebook, is used to share political news among the public.

The development and ascendancy of the Internet as an informational medium has altered the information environment in which political elites and interested citizens function (Woodly, 2008). In Malaysia, for example, the internet has become an alternative information source to mainstream media which is viewed as being pro-establishment. This was evident in the run-up to Malaysia's March 2008 General Elections (GE) where the internet became a key political battleground for the first time as the use of ICT came into full bloom with the opposition parties using the medium more than the Government parties to make inroads and won several states.

This development was largely attributed to the influence of the social media, especially blogs, which the opposition used to its advantage to spread its political agenda and to garner support from voters. Many observers have noted that the mushrooming of social media prior to the 2008 elections has had a tremendous impact, especially upon the young voters (Ramathan, 2008).

By April 2013, the landscape was very different as both the ruling party and opposition have made inroads in their use of social media. BN, for instance, had made strong inroads onto social media and had carved itself a competitive position. Its fan page on Facebook boasted 55,000 likes while supporters of the PR had 92,000. For both coalitions there were also several other fan and supporter pages reflecting smaller numbers. Party leaders' "like" numbers on Facebook are on the other hand much higher. BN's Najib has 1,580,000, while PAS's Nik Aziz has 889,000; Anwar Ibrahim has 480,000 and DAP's Lim Kit Siang has 120,000. The combined numbers of the three PR leaders are a good 80,000 likes below Najib.

Table 2: Fans Page on Facebook of Political and Leader Parties in Malaysia on April 2013

<b>Political Party</b>	<b>“Like” Fans Page</b>	<b>Party Leader</b>	<b>“Like” Fans Page</b>
Barisan Nasional (BN)	55,000	Najib (BN)	1,580,00
Pakatan Rakyat	92,000	PR Leaders	80,000
Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)	29,177	Anwar Ibrahim (PKR)	480,000
Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)	138,317	Nik Aziz (PAS)	889,000
Democratic Action Party (DAP)	510,230	Lim Kit Siang (DAP)	120,000

Source: [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) (17 April 2013)

Meanwhile on the Twitter front, the number of followers was: BN 24,000, PKR 27,000; DAP 27,000 PAS 1200 and PR supporters 1,900. Individual twitter followers for Najib stood at 1,460,000. For the Pakatan coalition leaders, Anwar Ibrahim has 267,000, Nik Aziz has 94,000 and Lim Kit Siang has 89,000 followers. Put together, Pakatan leaders combined only muster a third of Najib’s followers.

Table 3: Twitter Followers of Political Parties and Party Leaders in Malaysia in April 2013

<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Followers</b>	<b>Party Leader</b>	<b>Followers</b>
Barisan Nasional (BN)	24,000	Najib (BN)	1,460,000

Pakatan Rakyat (PR)	1,900	PR Leader	
Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)	27,000	Anwar Ibrahim (PKR)	267,000
Pan- Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)	1,200	Nik Aziz (PAS)	94,000
Democratic Action Party (DAP)	27,000	Lim Kit Siang (DAP)	89,000

Source: [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com) (17 April 2013)

YouTube was the main Social Media Platform that was used in the 2008 General Election, as both parties and party leaders had YouTube accounts and used them during the 2008 general election. By 2013 the usage of social media had increased and become wide as both parties and party leaders had joined Facebook and Twitter. The public who are also voters tend to get political news from social media in addition to sharing information which are vital for political parties and politicians. Hence, the public agenda was seen to be prominent and crucial for political success.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Social media in Malaysia 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. The social media has been used by the public to express their concern and grievance on issues that concern their welfare which the traditional media may not dare to report or broadcast. Hence agenda setting needs to be relooked into as the public agenda is taking a central stage through the new/social media. Thus it implies that the agenda setting model could be extended or remodeled to include the new/social media since they have influence on public agenda. Further implication of this is that politicians should keep abreast with the development in the social media so that they will understand current issues that are of great concern to the people and the society at large. We have to come to terms with the fact that we are now living in the digital and globalised era.

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