

Media Agenda and Public Agenda: A Study of Issues during the 13th General Election

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ABSTRACT

Media might play an important role in public's voting decision. Even so, it is unknown whether the media agenda counterpart public agenda with regard to the level of importance of the issues covered in the media. This study examined the issues of concern by the Malaysian mainstream newspapers, as well as the issues of concern by the public during the 13th General Election (GE 13). In particular, this study explored the relationship between media and public agenda; as well as the relationship between Malay language newspaper agenda and the Malay public agenda. Content analysis and survey were performed to fulfil these objectives. The findings showed that the media has different agenda from the public. In addition, the Malay newspaper and public of the same ethnic group do not share similar agenda of issues. On top of that, the findings showed the priority of issues perceived by media and public are different. While the public see national security as the most important issue of the country, media on the other hand, set religion and politics as the priority in their agenda.

Keywords: *Malay newspaper, media agenda, public agenda, issues, 13th General Election*

INTRODUCTION

The results of 13th general election brought a new political scenario in Malaysia. The ruling party Barisan Nasional suffered a huge defeat at the hands of the opposition, and failed to win two-third majority. The opposition, represented by Pakatan Rakyat (PR), won the majority seats especially in areas dominated by Chinese voters. Despite the GE 13 results which was described by many BN leaders including the Prime Minister Najib Razak, as 'Chinese Tsunami' (Oh Ei Sun, 2014), it cannot be denied that the Malays constitute the majority of Malaysian voters. GE 13 marks a new trend in the political scenario in Malaysia. For the first time in the Malaysian election history, the battle between the pro-government (BN) and opposition (PR) political parties were dominated by Malays.

It is believed that the GE 13 results are highly influenced by media. Media are crucial in politics due to its attribute of immediate and instant dissemination of political issues (Zahid, Sarah and Hassan, 2013). Despite the emergence of Internet and social media which

plays an important role in disseminating information to the public during elections (Ali, Normah, Mohd Azul & Mohd Nor Shahizan, 2016; Lumsden, 2013; Mohd Aizuddin, 2014; Mohd Faizal, 2016; Muhammad Hakimi, Abdul Latiff & Chang, 2016; Siti Zabedah, 2013; Tham, & Hasmah, 2014). The newspaper is still considered as one of the main platform that the political parties utilise for election campaigns. Concomitantly, newspaper plays a significant role to influence people's voting decisions.

Mass media are said to report issues that are related to the agenda and have set to influence the public's voting decisions. According to Mun and Li (2011), news coverage might have certain influence on decision-making to vote for the representatives for the House of Representatives (federal level) and the State Legislative assembly (state level). The issues covered in the newspaper prior to general election might have an enormous influence on voters' decisions, which could later be translated into the poll results during the general election (Aini Maznina & Nerawi, 2015). Even so, it is unknown whether the media agenda is parallel with the public agenda particularly on the level of importance of the issues covered in the media. At this juncture, in order to have a better understanding of the results of GE 13, it is worthwhile to comprehend the issues of concern by the mainstream newspapers, as well as the issues of concern by the public.

This research was conducted with the following objectives:

1. To identify the issues as reported by the four mainstreams newspapers (Malay, English, Tamil and Chinese newspaper) during PRU13.
2. To identify issues that were highlighted by the public after PRU13.
3. To analyse the influence of agenda setting by the mainstream newspapers towards the public
4. To analyse the influence of agenda setting by the Malay language newspaper on its Malay public

AGENDA SETTING AND ISSUES IN MEDIA

Agenda setting theory was first put to the test by McCombs and Shaw when they embarked on an exploratory study of the 1968 presidential election coverage in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. They sought to find out if there was a relationship between priority issues of the mass media and the priority issues of the public. Their study published in 1972 showed that there was a high correlation between issues voters believed were important and issues reported prominently in the media. The success of agenda setting theory used in examining effect of mass communication has seen more than 400 empirical studies being conducted worldwide covering not only election campaign news but also includes diverse issues encompassing economy, civil rights, drug, environment, crime, foreign policies and other public issues (McCombs, 2013).

The agenda setting theory postulates that the mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of issues on their news agenda to the public agenda. Starting off from Walter Lipmann's (1946) idea that establishes the principal connection between world events and the images in the public mind, agenda setting theory continues to expand. The most popular notion about agenda setting theory is the agenda that the media "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its reader what to think about" (Cohen, 1963, p.13). McCombs (1976) posits that agenda setting asserts that audience take note on the salience of the news media, note what is emphasised,

what receives heavy play, and incorporate a similar set of weights into their personal agendas. It is a relational concept that specifies a strong positive relationship between the emphases of mass communication and the salience of topics to the individuals in the audience.

McCombs, Shaw and Weaver (2014) argue that the media use a number of cues to indicate the importance of the issues being reported, such as the size of the headings, and, the positioning of news. News published in the front page of the newspaper is considered as very important compared to news published in Page 5. Similarly, Wu and Coleman (2009) pointed out that agenda setting is the “phenomenon of mass media selecting certain issues and portraying them frequently and prominently, which leads people to perceive those issues as more important than others.” Thus, this explains why politicians rely heavily on the media – either traditional or new media – to disseminate information to their constituents during general election campaigns.

There are two most basic assumptions of agenda setting namely (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. The first assumption can be related to the ownership of the media. In the context of Malaysia, media ownership is closely associated with the government or political parties. It is an “open secret” that there is an active involvement of press owners in the Malaysian politics thus the owners can filter and shape the media agenda based on the their affiliation to certain political parties. This can be done through ownership control which can take place in terms of editorial policies either by allocative and operational control that define and influence the goals, ideology and content of the newspaper (Jeniri, 2005).

The second assumption is best described by how certain issues are being highlighted in the media. Freeland (2012) acknowledges that in order to examine media influence on an audience, consideration must be given to the audience’s predisposition to certain beliefs. Similarly, Iyengar & Kinder (1987) also acknowledge that the more frequent and prominent the news media covers an issue, the more that issue becomes accessible in the audience’s memory. Over time, issues highlighted in the media usually become prominent in the public opinion and the ability to influence which issues, persons and topic are perceived as the most important of the day is the essence of agenda setting role of the mass media according to McCombs (2013). In the case of general election, the issues highlighted are deemed to be of significant importance by the media thus the constant coverage on the issue by the media, the more the public think about the issue and find it to be important. This somehow will have some influence on the public to decide which candidates/political party they will choose when casting their votes. Those with the greatest mass media exposure are most likely to know where the candidates stand on different issues (McCombs, 2002).

However, media are more likely to influence voting preference among the undecided voters. Hopmann and colleagues (2010) investigated the overall effects on party choice of how parties were portrayed in television news during an election campaign. In particular, they content analysed the daily election news coverage and daily public opinion polls. The main purpose of their study was to examine whether the portrayal of parties in television news coverage influences party’s preference among people during the Danish national election in November 2007. The results of their study concluded that effects of direct media exposure are found only for undecided voters, not for the decided ones. Based

on their finding, we can see that the impact of electronic media is stronger on voters who are not sure which party to vote for.

In 1998, McCombs expanded the agenda setting function of mass media by incorporating framing in the theory. At this juncture, McCombs points out that the media not only successful in telling us what to think about, they can also be successful in telling us how to think about it. He started to compare the array of attributes in the media and the particular ways of framing an object that can dominate the way in which the public thinks and talk about these objects. These agenda attributes which have been called “the second level” of agenda setting to distinguish them from the first level agenda setting which the later focused on the relative salience of issues or subjects.

For more than 40 years, agenda-setting research has demonstrated the centrality of news coverage, the focus of public opinion and the agenda of issues considered paramount by the public. The classic example of this was the study by Weaver, Graber & McCombs and Eyal on the 1976 US presidential election. Their findings revealed a striking degree of correspondence between the agenda of attributes in the Chicago Tribune and the agenda of attributes in Illinois voters’ descriptions of Jimmy Carter and Jerry Ford (cited in McCombs, Llamas, Lopez- Esobar & Rey, 1997).

In a similar vein, McCombs (2002) stressed that “objects are the things on which the attention of the media and the public are focused on. Each of these objects has numerous attributes, characteristics and traits that describe the object” (p.5). Thus, if one wants to study the saliency of an object in a comprehensive way, one must study the attributes or characteristics of the particular object. Furthermore, when a particular study on agenda setting is concerned about issues and attributes, then we can safely conclude that it is a “first level agenda setting” leading to “second level agenda setting” which is in line with what our current study is attempting to undertake. The agenda of issues or other objects emphasised by the news has an impact on what the public is thinking about. The agenda of attributes covered by the media for each of these issues or public figures for instance, influence the thinking itself that we hold in mind. McCombs (2002) borrowed Walter Lippmann’s phrase, “the world outside and the pictures in our heads” to explain this phenomenon.

According to McCombs et. al. (2014), the productivity of the Agenda Setting theory in the past and at present, since its inception around 50 years ago, has set up a highly promising future. This prominent scholar and colleagues with more than 40 years experience in a collective and individual research on the Agenda Setting theory have highlighted to the readers of what they called “*seven distinct facets*” of the Agenda Setting theory. These seven facets according to them include: (1) basic agenda setting; (2) attribute agenda setting; (3) network agenda setting; (4) the need for orientation; (5) consequences of agenda setting effects; (6) origins of the media agenda; and (7) agenda melding. (McCombs et.al., 2014).

In this study, we focus only on the basic agenda setting and the attribute agenda setting, as we perceive these two (2) are most relevant. The basic agenda setting which they termed as “First level agenda setting” is the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda regarding the salience of issues or objects whereas the “second level agenda setting” focuses on the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda regarding the salience of attributes of these objects. In this study, issues or objects covered the most during the 13th Malaysia general election are our main focus.

However, the new social media, to some extent provides the public with a partial power to influence the traditional media's news coverage. For example, a study conducted in China by Ying Jiang (2014) examined what is termed as "reversed agenda -setting effects" phenomena. One of the main focuses of their study was to find out how the public agenda through online social media (weibo) for instance, influences the news coverage of the traditional media, State controlled media China Central Television (CCTV). They found that the topics discussed by the general public in the online social media have a higher level of saliency which in turn influences the state owned media's coverage in China. Ying Jiang (2014) after her/his study joined other previous researchers in concluding that the general public, traditionally known as receivers is no longer an object dependent on agenda setting by the media, but a subject of communication and they propose issues on the agenda and subsequently this agenda can be accepted by the traditional media

In the Malaysian context, a study by Idris and Chang (2012) shows that the Chinese media agenda have a significant rank-order correlation with the Chinese public agenda suggesting the newspapers influence Chinese readers on what to think about. Similarly, a study by Mun & Li (2011) suggests that there is a presence of agenda setting in the news reporting on the issues raised by politicians leading to the 12th general election. They also found out that there are similarities of agenda between the public and politicians.

The online media also play an important role to form public opinion during election. A study conducted by Tham and Hasmah (2014) on the usage of social media (Facebook, YouTube and Twitter) during 13th General Election shows that Facebook was the most popular social media tool that parties actively engaged with during the 13th general election campaign period. Their study also indicates that political parties influence the public on what to think about using social media.

In reviewing media agenda-setting, this chapter hypothesises that (1) there is a relationship between overall media agenda and overall public agenda; and (2) there is a relationship between Malay agenda and the issues in Malay public agenda. These two hypotheses are based on the issues reported by four mainstreams (Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil) newspapers during campaigning period of GE13 and to identify issues that were highlighted by the public after GE13. The Malay language newspapers are represented by Utusan Malaysia (UM) and Berita Harian (BH); The Star (TS) and New Straits Times (NST) representing English language newspaper; Tamil Nesan (TN) and Malaysian Nanban (MN) representing Tamil newspaper, and Sin Chew (SC) and Nanyang Siang Pao (NY) representing Chinese newspaper. Among the local newspapers with high number of readerships and circulations, these eight newspapers were chosen to be content-analysed for news between February and July 2013.

THE ROLE OF MALAYSIAN MEDIA IN GENERAL ELECTION

Media in Malaysia are mostly ethnic-based which cater to the different ethnic groups. Newspaper such as Utusan Malaysia (UM), Berita Harian (BH), Harian Metro (HM) and Kosmo which are published in Malay cater mainly for the Malay group while Nanyang Siang Pau (NY), Sin Chew (SC), International Times, Oriental Daily News, Tamil Nesan (TN) and Malaysian Nanban (MN) are publish in their respective native language and are targeting for the Chinese and Indian readers respectively. The English newspapers such as the New Straits Times, The Star and the Malay Mail are mostly read by the literate urbanites which saw a high number of its readerships and circulation in urban areas. The operation of media in

Malaysia is governed by the press law such as Printing Presses and Publication Act, the Internal Security Act, Official Secret Act, Defamation Act and Sedition Act which are seen to control the content that newspapers can publish.

As mentioned earlier, media ownerships in Malaysia are mostly connected to the state or political parties. Thus, the coverage of news in different newspapers is a reflection of the owners' influence and their association with the "people in power." This can be seen clearly during election campaign where news from the opposition parties seldom appears in the mainstream newspaper. The control of the mainstream media by the political parties has resulted in manipulative news in which the journalists and editors are seen to be distorting the reality to safeguard the interest of the proprietors (Mun & Li, 2011).

In this study, the selections of eight newspapers from four different languages are mostly due to the fact that these newspapers have high number of circulation and readership. In a report prepared by Audit Bureau of Circulation Malaysia (2015), the circulation and readership for *Utusan Malaysia* are 182,748 and 699,000 respectively while *Berita Harian* has a circulation of 138,805 and 1,048,000 of readership. For the English language newspaper, the Star circulation is recorded at 298,821 while its readership stand at 1,839,000 compared to New Straits Times at 95,880 and 236,000 for its circulation and readerships respectively. On the other hand, Sin Chew has a total number of 463,735 circulation and 1,300,000 readerships compared to Nanyang Siang Pau at 114,000 and 165,000 respectively. Tamil Nesan has a slightly lower number of circulations at 43,000 and readership at 141,000 compared to Malaysian Nanban at 55,000 and 105,000 respectively.

Utusan Malaysia is well known for its connection or link of being part of UMNO, the largest component party of Barisan Nasional, the ruling government of Malaysia. Most of its reporting on political news is slanted towards the 'powers-that-be' (Tan, 2006). *Berita Harian*, on the other hand is also closely link to the ruling party through Media Prima Berhad, a subsidiary media corporation that controls several television networks, newspaper (including New Straits Times and Malay Mail) and radio stations (Netto, 2007). Meanwhile, the Star which began its publication in 1971 is owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) which happens to be a component party of the ruling government, i.e. Barisan Nasional.

The most popular Chinese newspaper in Malaysia, Sin Chew Jit Poh or Sin Chew Daily, started its operation in 1929 and is owned by Sin Chew Media Corporation Berhad. Sin Chew is another MCA linked newspaper when in 1982; the Aw family sold the company to Lim Kheng Kim and later saw the merger with Ming Pao Enterprise and Nanyang Press holdings. Nanyang Siang Pau is owned by Huaren Holdings, an investment company operated and owned by MCA.

The Tamil Nesan is one of the oldest of the three Tamil language daily newspapers in Malaysia. It was founded in 1924 and has undergone various major changes throughout the years. Datin Seri Indrani Samy Vellu, the wife of the former MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu became a major shareholder in Tamil Nesan in 1980. Tamil Nesan has been criticized for being politically biased as it is owned by MIC, a political party within the Barisan Nasional alliance.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted to examine (1) relationship between overall media agenda and overall public agenda; and (2) relationship between Malay language newspaper agenda and

the Malay public agenda. Content analysis and survey were carried out to fulfill the objectives of the study. Quantitative content analysis was used to examine what issues were discussed in mainstream newspapers during GE 13. Data were collected in May 2013. Apart from content analysis, a survey was also used to identify public perception about similar issues covered in the media in July 2013, which is after the general election.

For media agenda, issues reported by the four mainstream (Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil) newspapers during the campaigning period of GE13 were examined. For the public agenda, issues that were highlighted by the public after GE13 were examined. The Malay language newspapers were represented by Utusan Malaysia (UM) and Berita Harian (BH); The Star (TS) and New Straits Times (ST) representing English language newspaper while Tamil Nesan (TN), Malaysian Nanban (MN), Sin Chew (SC) and Nanyang Siang Pao (NY) representing the Tamil and Chinese newspapers respectively. Among the local newspapers with a high number of readerships and circulation, these eight newspapers were chosen to be content-analyzed for news between February and July 2013.

Descriptive and correlation analyses were carried out accordingly. In particular, descriptive analysis was performed to identify the ranking of issues placed by the overall mainstream as well as Malay newspapers. In addition, correlation analysis was run to test the relationship between the newspaper agenda and public agenda.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Issues in mainstream overall media and Malay media

This study was conducted to identify the ranking of issues placed by the overall mainstream newspapers using Malay, English, Indian and Chinese language newspapers in comparison with those of the mainstream Malay language newspapers during the GE13. A quantitative content analysis was performed to fulfil this objective. The results were presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of the ranking of issues in mainstream overall language vs. Malay language newspaper

Issues	Overall (N=8096)	Malay (N=1783)
Politics	1	1
Religion	2	2
Crime	3	6
Leadership	4	4
Development issues	5	7
Govt administration	6	5
National security	7	3
Social	8	15
Environment	9	11
Traffic woes	10	8
Economy	11	9
Education	12	13
National unity	14	11
Nationalism	14	15

The findings show that both overall newspapers and Malay newspapers considered the issues of politics and religion as highly important when these two issues were ranked at the top two of the agenda. In contrast, minimal issues like national security and social were ranked differently by these two media. Interestingly, the majority of other issues such as

with Malay public agenda ($r=.962, p=.000$). Therefore the research confirms that overall public agenda and Malay public agenda are the same.

Table 4: Correlation between overall public agenda and Malay public agenda

Variable		Malay Public	
Spearman's rho	Public Overall	Pearson Correlation	.962
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	16

Media agenda and public agenda

The researchers were also interested to see the relationship between media agenda and public agenda. Table 5 illustrates a comparison of issues ranked by overall media agenda with overall public agenda. The results show that majority of the issues perceived by the two groups are different from one another. In other words, the agenda set by the media were different from those that were set by the public. For example, the overall media set politics and religion as the top two agenda but to the public, crime and social are the main agenda that they perceived as important. However, for the issue of national security, both overall media and public share the same level of importance.

Table 5: Comparison of overall media agenda vs. overall public agenda

Issues	Overall Media (N=8096)	Overall Public (N=1463)
Politic	1	4
Religion	2	13
Crime	3	1
Leadership	4	9
Development issues	5	12
Govt administration	6	14
National security	7	7
Social	8	2
Environment	9	5
Traffic woes	10	16
Economy	11	3
Education	12	11
National unity	14	6
Nationalism	14	17
Health issues	14	10
IR	16	15
Immigrants	16	8

In order to verify the findings found earlier, a correlation analysis was carried out. The results are presented in Table 6. It was found that overall newspaper agenda does not have a significant relationship with overall public agenda ($r=.171, p=.263$). Therefore the findings confirm that overall media agenda fail to set the overall public agenda.

Table 6: Correlation between overall media agenda and overall public agenda (July 2013)

Variable		Public Overall	
Spearman's rho	Media Overall	Pearson Correlation	.171
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.263
		N	16

Malay media agenda and Malay public agenda

Table 7 shows a comparison between Malay newspaper agenda and Malay public agenda. The research found that majority of the issues between the two groups is incompatible. This signifies that Malay newspaper were not able to set the agenda of the Malay public. For example, the Malay media set politics and religion as the top two agenda but to the Malay public, national security and traffic woes are the main agenda that they perceived as important. Therefore, the Malay newspaper and public of the same ethnic group do not share similar agenda of the issues.

Table 7: Comparison of Malay media agenda vs. Malay public agenda

Issues	Malay Media Agenda (N=1783)	Malay Public Agenda (N=723)
Politic	1	4
Religion	2	11
National security	3	1
Leadership	4	8
Govt administration	5	13
Crime	6	15
Development issues	7	6
Traffic woes	8	2
Economy	9	5
Environment	11	16
National unity	11	3
Education	13	12
Health issues	13	10
Social	15	17
Nationalism	15	9
Immigrants	16	14
IR	17	7

To further understand the relationship, we conducted a correlation analysis and the results are shown in Table 8. From the analysis, the study found that Malay newspaper agenda have a very feeble relationship and does not have a significant relationship with Malay public agenda ($r=.080$, $p=.385$). Therefore the research confirms that Malay newspaper agenda was unsuccessful in setting up the Malay public agenda of the issues.

Table 8: Correlation between Malay media agenda and Malay public agenda

Variable		Malay Public	
Spearman's rho	Malay Media	Pearson Correlation	.080
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.385
		N	16

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The main objectives of this study were to identify the issues of importance covered in mainstream newspapers and to determine whether the media agenda is in line with public agenda. The study which used quantitative content analysis and survey methods found that the agenda that the media set is not parallel with the public agenda. Both the media and the public indicated the level of importance among the issues differently.

Interestingly, this study found a similar pattern of results with similar studies conducted by Syed Arabi Idid in 2008 and 2011 but different from the study he conducted in 2004 (Idid, 2011). The study he conducted in 2004 found a significant relationship between media agenda and the issues discussed among the public. On the other hand, the study carried out by Idid in 2008 found that the ranking of issues were reported differently by media from the public. The priority of issues among the media and public were different. This is due to several important incidents that occurred at that time such as MH 370 and Lahad Datu crisis. That could have contributed to why the public considered national security as the most important issue, rather than politics and religion as set in the media agenda.

In relation to the issues of importance by media, the study found out the issues ranked by overall newspapers is not much different from Malay newspaper. Politics and religion are ranked as important by both overall newspaper and Malay newspaper. Different from previous studies conducted by Idid in 2004, 2008 and 2011, religion is treated as an important issue by the overall and Malay newspapers (Idid, 2011) in this study. This is because Malay newspapers which are mostly read by Malays, who are Muslims, and religion is treated as an important issue. This is parallel with the findings of study conducted by Aini Maznina and Nerawi (2015) who studied about Islam-related issues during GE 13. In addition, apart from politics, religion is treated as an important issue by Malay newspaper due to the fact that they are mostly read by Malays who are religious.

In conclusion, public has different agenda than the one media set for them. More importantly, during general elections, people in a society tend to regard issues that directly affect their personal lives as important and therefore need to be adequately addressed by politicians in order to win the public votes. More important than not, media as a vital vehicle in addressing the important issues to the society, should be wisely utilised by politicians during general elections.

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