

## Burying the News for the Public: Agenda Cutting of the Tamil Newspapers and MIC Candidate Facebook during the 13<sup>th</sup> General Election

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### ABSTRACT

Guided by Agenda Cutting theory, this study examines the pattern of media coverage on issues portrayed in Tamil newspapers and Facebook during Malaysian General Election 13. A total of 1309 news articles from *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysia Nanban* and 111 postings on MIC's Facebook were identified and examined during the election campaign period from April 20 – May 6, 2013, specifically just before and soon after the election. A total of 127 Facebook accounts of MIC's candidates for state and parliamentary constituencies were examined during the same period. Findings show that out of the 17 examined issues eight issues (i.e., crime, social, environment, national unity, nationalism, health issues, international relations and immigrants) were not reported by these Indian dailies. A similar result can also be found on MIC's parliamentary and state seat candidates' Facebook. Findings from this study draw a conclusion that without a flawed agenda cutting strategy, the MIC could have garnered valuable electoral votes during its GE13 campaign.

**Keywords:** *agenda cutting, Tamil newspapers, Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), Facebook, GE13*

## INTRODUCTION

Recent media advancement has contributed to the greater role of the media globally. The dependency on media varies and changes as the generations shift. Printed media which acted as a conventional channel of information dissemination all this while has been losing out to the emerging electronic media such as television, radio and computer. The revolution of information dissemination is enforced with the rapid development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Via ICT, there is literally a new phenomenon in information dissemination through SMS, MMS and via online applications such as blogs and social networks. Gradually, the Internet has evolved into a more influential political news media as compared to newspapers. Gradually, the Internet has evolved into a more influential political news media than newspapers. Wilson, Leong, Nge, and Ngerng (2011) revealed that youth still rely on traditional media to obtain news, but traditional media fail to provide sufficient information for youth. Thus, youth resort to getting additional information from alternative news websites. Rahim (2010) also ascertained that the Internet was singled out as one of the main contributing factors that swing young voters to the opposition coalition People's Front in 12th General Election.

In a multiracial country like Malaysia where racial and religious sensitivities abound, the media constantly tread on precarious ground in balancing between what to write and what not to write. Self-censorship on reporting sensitive issues also raises the concern of fair reporting. Journalists are responsible for emphasising fairness and balance in news coverages of conflict (Fico & Drager, 2001). Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that reporting of any type of news is not value-free. Reports are written in the context of the values of the reporters, the superiors, the norms of work setting, the goals and resources of the media organization and the position of the organisation within the broader society (Fico & Drager, 2001).

The former Information Minister Datuk Zainuddin Maidin has said that the Malaysian media have, by agreement, decided to stay away from contentious issues of racial and religious sensitivities in order not to create unnecessary tensions and even hatred among the people. "The media played an important role in toning down issues that could incite certain sections of a community...it is better to have peace with compromise rather than freedom without peace." ("Sensitive issues are out," 2006).

The emergence of race-based political parties could be seen in Malaysia even before independence. The need for supporting media acting for political parties is fundamental in delivering their values and principles. Hence, the role of media caters to the public and their needs according to the aspirations of the different races. In the context of race-based newspapers, Shaari, Ng, and Raman (2006) stated that a characteristic of the Malaysian vernacular newspapers is their tendency to concentrate on events important to their respective communities. This automatically derives a general idea that those respective newspapers will absolutely discuss the political needs of their respective society.

## MEDIA AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Personal or public opinions and discussions are often derived from information obtained from the media. Media appears to be the authority in convincing the audience. The public will rarely believe an unknown person or party that comes to the fore to convince the audience of their political agenda. However, people may take note of the political agenda if

the same thing is done by the media. Scheufele (2002) found that there was a positive interaction between the usage of mass media, including newspapers and television hard news with interpersonal discussions on politics.

The importance of media and its superficial outcomes have perpetuated the bloom of supporting media teams among political organisations. Eilders (1997, 2000, 2001) stated that for the media to have a strong impact on politics, a high congruence of the different media outlets is required. Only if all media are converging on the same issue (focusing), frame it in a similar way (consonance), and if they do so with perseverance (persistence), can the media be expected to strongly impact the political agenda (Eilders, 1997, 2000, 2001). Yet, these conditions for strong media effects are hardly ever met. Most of the time, emphasis on the issue is scattered, framed differently, and coverage is short-lived and ephemeral.

The relation between media and political communication in Malaysia can be explained according to the democratisation context. The role of the media in the process of democratisation has been greatly underestimated, partly because the literature on political science and communication is largely fragmented (Hackett & Zhao, 2005). Studies which have addressed the relationship between the media and politics in democratisation contexts usually have two major concerns: (1) democratisation through the media and (2) democratisation of the media itself (Hackett & Zhao, 2005; Salgado, 2009). It is difficult to identify a direct relationship between cause and effect between the media and democratisation as the available empirical evidence is anecdotal and so cannot be subjected to rigorous empirical testing (Votmer & Rowsley, 2009). The media may be viewed either as dependent on society and mirroring its contours or as primary movers and moulders (McQuail, 2005). Likewise, media freedom has been perceived as an indicator of democratic reform or as a precondition for democratic institutions to work properly. For both media and democratisation scholars, the mass media is regarded as one of the key democratic institutions (Street, 2010; McQuail, 2005) vital in improving the quality of the electoral system, political parties, parliament, judiciary, and other branches of the state even for civil society and safeguarding their democratic performance.

Mass media can play a salient role in democratising countries, less pragmatically and more normatively. The requirements of democracy include certain habits, beliefs, attitudes and values (Almond & Verba, 1963; Diamond, 1994). The role of the media can provide insight into the development of a democratic civil society and individual political development. The responsibilities of democratic citizenship, while perhaps generally considered less acute in stable democracies, are heightened in the chaotic process of democratisation. Here the socialisation process is disrupted or limited and all institutions of politics, economics, and society are in a state of flux. Media are capable of producing changes in values, attitudes, and behaviours congruent with democratic citizenship. Thus, "media can play an instrumental role in resocialization and modernization by teaching a new way of participating in politics and socioeconomic life and by encouraging new individual and national aspirations" (Gross, 2002, p.90). Unlike traditional media, the Internet and social media in particular have a channeling function of taking users through links based on their interest (Coleman & Blumler, 2009), thus allowing individuals to gather more information and consequently develop higher levels of political knowledge (and political efficacy) (Vitak et al., 2011).

Others have suggested that social media force users to confront (political) information that they would otherwise avoid (Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010) or that social exchanges on social media can often be political (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009) and thus facilitate the sharing of information (Zúñiga, 2012). Yet, as others have pointed out, comparatively among discussed and shared topics, there is a low level of actual political knowledge in social media (Boyd, 2008).

#### PROBLEM STATEMENT

Generally, there is a prominent linkage between media and political communication in which politicians are seen to be highly dependent on local media to carry their political agenda. Hence, there is collusion between media and political agenda. Media disseminate political ideas and issues to the public and various communities of interest. In the Malaysian context, this is whereby both mainstream and vernacular print media are seen to be actively playing their roles in agenda building, priming and Agenda Setting.

Findings by a scholar in political communication have shown that media carry a fairly standard set of issues during the election campaigns (Idid, 2011). The range of issues carried by the media includes politics, religion, crime, national security, national unity, nationalism, environment, economy, education and even up to health issues, immigrants and government administration. However, there is a variation in terms of news salience between dominant mainstream newspapers in Malay and English, and the vernacular newspapers during the election campaign. For instance, the vernacular newspapers would prioritise politics, crime and economy as their media agenda as opposed to religion which is favoured by Malay and English newspapers. Clearly, this variation indicates the normal process of Agenda Setting to create news salience. However, it opens up the possibility for the media to execute quite the opposite process by ignoring and keeping the issues off the media agenda. This process is known as agenda cutting (Colistra, 2012), which affects agenda building and news salience. It is, therefore, important to examine the extent of agenda cutting practice in the newsroom during the election campaign. However, due to constraints of space in this paper, we will focus on only Tamil medium newspapers and political Facebook in order to find out their media agenda ranking in comparison with the public agenda of the Indian community.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

##### *History of Tamil Newspapers and Political Facebook*

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multilingual society. The population as of 2010 was 28.6 million consisting of 67.3% Bumiputera, 24.5% Chinese, 7.3% Indians and 0.9% of other races (Department of Statistics, 2014). Due to their small percentage, the Malaysian Indians are considered a minority in the country. Each ethnic group in Malaysia have had their own newspaper since the early history of the country. All of the early newspapers, whether English or vernacular newspapers were published in the three Straits Settlement states of Singapore, Malacca and Penang. The Tamil newspapers for the Indian ethnic group came about in the Strait Settlements before 1880. Tangai Sinegan was published in 1876 (Ibrahim et al., 2012).

According to Lent (1974), reformist movement of Malayan Indians after 1920 saw the lively formation of newspapers such as *Penang Cnana Chan'an Daily News* (1912-13),

*Singapore Weekly Sun* (1910) and *Penang Janopakari Dai-y I'lews* (1914). After 1920, in seeking better immigration policies, working conditions and political rights that was denied to the Malayan Indians, Tamil newspapers in Malaya adopted the approach of newspapers of their motherland such as *Viduthalai Hindu* and *Amnia Bazar Patrika* as their models.

Besides Tamil newspapers, crusading periodicals of the pre-World War II era like the organs of the Tamil Reform Association, *Tamil Murasu* (1932), *Jothy of Singapore*, *Reform* (1936) and *Munnetram* (Singapore tri-weekly), and a group of small newspapers and journals promoted Tamil literary revival. The others include *Tamzl Kody* that was published in Malacca from 1938 to 1940 and *Tamil Pannai*, a 1941 publication that fostered Tamil language and culture. In 1940 a former *Tamil Nesan* editor by the name of Subramaniam Iyer started *Jeyamani*, the predecessor of the periodical *Jananayagan* that was subsidised by the Malayan Communist Party from 1945 to 1948.

By 1930s and 1940s the Tamil newspapers became more radical. Anti-colonial propaganda became more extreme after several left-wing publications in English and Tamil mushroomed among the Malayan Indians immediately after World War II. This prompted the British authorities in Malaya to introduce strict rules and some changes to the Indian journalism. A quarter century later, new laws were made and there was a new goal in building a fresh national identity and consciousness.

#### *Social Media: Facebook*

The Internet has brought about a huge change in the way we do things and on many aspects of our society. It triggers innovation in a different manner from previous technologies, with new ideas spreading quickly across national borders (Xue, 2005). Through the website (Internet world stats), by December 2013, a total of 20,140,125 people (i.e., 67.0%) of Malaysians were using the Internet. There were also 13,589,520 Malaysia Facebook users in December 2012 (Social Media Facts, 2013).

In 2012, Malaysia ranked 59<sup>th</sup> on the ICT Development Index of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and the country had registered marked growth in recent years with improved access to computers and the Internet among its citizens (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission [MCMC], 2014). The percentage of households with a computer more than doubled from 31.3 per cent to 64.1 per cent between 2005-2011, while the percentage of households with Internet access quadrupled from 15.2 per cent to 61.4 per cent (International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2013).

The 2013 Election was Malaysia's first "social media election", Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Razak had conceded that social media like Facebook and Twitter would be a key battlefield for Barisan Nasional (BN) in defending Putrajaya. The Barisan National chairman, himself has more than 1 million followers on Twitter and some 1.2 million "likes" on Facebook (Malaysian Social Media Week, 2013). He reiterated further:

The coming months will be a fascinating period for people in both politics and the Internet. "I can confidently predict that this will be Malaysia's first 'social media election'. I see with the advent of ICT, social media as both something good, but also our bane... could be our Achilles' heel as well... (Tham & Zanuddin, 2014; Lim, 2013).

The country's sixth prime minister had admitted that social media could be a double-edged sword for his party UMNO, conceding that the Internet was among the chief causes of BN's record loses in the 2008 polls. In an interview with CNN anchor Fareed Zakaria at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Switzerland, Najib said that voters were getting more educated and critical, attributing this to the rise of information technology (Lim, 2013).

The new media's ability to penetrate and influence the political views of a large section of the Malaysian population prompted most of the politicians to increasingly resort to this medium to inform, communicate and get connected with their target voters (Yassin, Zanuddin & Tham, 2013). BN lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority in the historic 2008 general elections that saw four states — Perak, Penang, Kedah and Selangor — falling to the loose coalition of Pakatan Rakyat (PR) made up of PAS, PKR and DAP. Political analysts have said that Malaysians were turning more to the Internet to get information, which has led to politicians setting up Facebook and Twitter accounts to reach out to voters. This meant the public were increasingly bypassing the mainstream media and this further contributed to lower newspaper circulation and smaller broadcasting audiences (Yassin et al., 2013).

According to Statista, a monitoring website of Facebook, Facebook users in Malaysia are expected to reach about 13.6 million in 2019, up from 10.9 million in 2016 out of a 28.3 million population (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/490484/number-of-malaysia-facebook-users/>). This figure represented a 48 per cent population penetration while the Oxford Internet Institute noted, Malaysia along with Brazil, has the highest number of Twitter users in the world. A total of 29 per cent of Facebook users in Malaysia are aged between 25 and 34 years. Based on Internet Users Survey 2012, it was found that 37.9 per cent of the users in Malaysia were under 24 years old (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission [MCMC], 2013, United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2014).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *Agenda Setting VS Agenda Cutting*

Agenda Setting theory gained recognition in the field of communication study in understanding the mass media and public opinion. This theory explains the power of the mass media and its ability to tell the public what is the important issue. Communities determine information that is deemed important to them and the media is responsible for providing the information. People will pick up and digest the information, and if necessary use the information to make an informed decision (Idid & Chang, 2012).

The theory was first introduced in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. However, the idea of Agenda Setting was founded by Walter Lippmann (1922). In his book entitled "Public Opinion", he explained that the mass media creates the impression in the public mind and consequently leads people to think about the issue (Miller, 2005, p. 269). Agenda Setting theory opined that the mass media is able to influence the flow or the strength of behaviour in the receiver. The mass media also has an impact in shaping the agenda of political campaigns and attracting public attention on political issues (Ying, 2014).

The scope and process prescribed in the Agenda Setting theory are divided into three parts, namely (i) the media agenda, (ii) the public agenda and (iii) the policy agenda. Each of these agenda contains important topics. Media agenda addresses the issue of media sources (e.g. newspapers, television and radio). Public agenda addresses the perception of public on what is important. Policy agenda represents the issues selected by policy makers (referring

to legislators who can influence the legislative process) (Miller, 2005, p. 270). All these processes occur in the theory of Agenda Setting and many studies have explored the theory in different fields such as communications, politics and sociology.

### Agenda Cutting

Agenda Setting research that focused on issues salience by the mass media has been explored over and over again by communication scholars. However, these research seem to highlight a gap that has not been researched. The researchers have begun to question, what about the issues that were never raised? That leads to the concept of agenda cutting (Colistra, 2012).

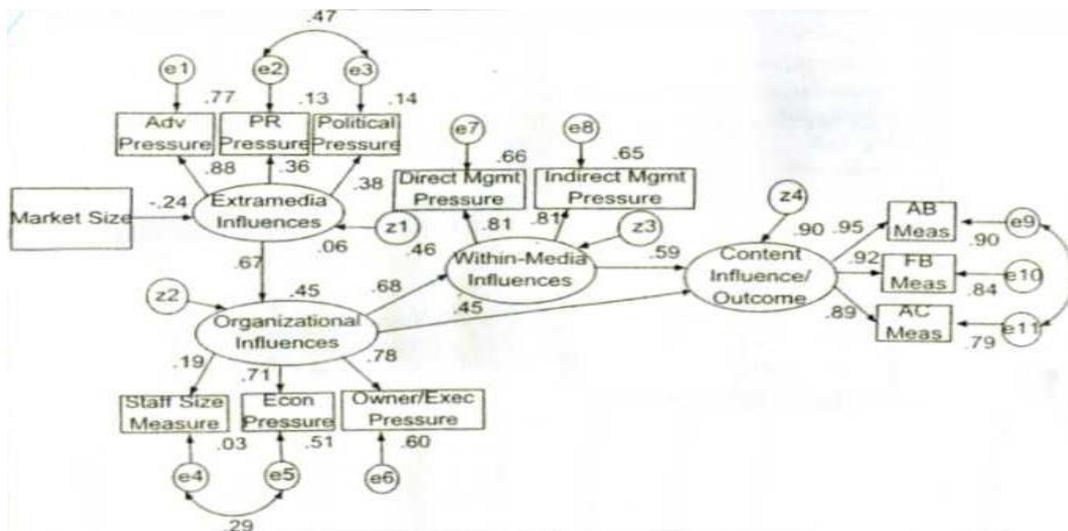


Figure 1: Agenda-Cutting Model (Colistra, 2012)

McComb and Shaw highlighted that some issues were not reported in the mass media. They described the issues that were not reported as being “cut” out. Agenda cutting studies actually work in parallel with Agenda Setting but not many studies have been done on this. Agenda Setting was first mentioned by Wober and Gunter (1988) as a process to divert some public issue by either giving the issue little or no coverage.

Agenda cutting may occur in several ways such as (i) placing the issue as lower than other news, (ii) diverting the relevant news items or (iii) ignoring the issue. Wober and Gunter have conducted several studies to prove that agenda cutting has always happened in the West (Colistra, 2012). In addition to proving that there are inherent agenda cutting in the West, Wober also introduced three major factors causing this agenda cutting.

Firstly, is due to logistical constraints. One of the reasons for agenda cutting is a matter of logistical constraints, such as the physical space limitation and news reporter’s constraint. Basically, media organisations can only report some news issues in a period of time. This ultimately will lead to some other issues being removed or silenced.

Secondly, the prejudices of journalists. Wober asserts that agenda cutting may also occur due to journalist and media organisation prejudices. This goes on to highlight how journalist personal’s views can influence news broadcast and coverage.

The third factor will be the internal and external influences which are said to be the biggest factor that leads to agenda cutting (Colistra, 2012). In other words, attempt to

conceal or ignore certain issues can be due to respective interests of media organisations. This factor has been proven through a pilot study that was conducted by Colistra (2012). Colistra examined the coverage of FCC’s digital spectrum “loan” to broadcasters in three news networks. She found that media entities that stood to gain from the giveaway, the network television stations, ignored the issue over the nine-year of period of study, while the newspapers placed it low on their agendas and CNN only ran one relevant broadcast. The findings suggested that media organisations that stand to benefit from policy issues may not necessarily, or usually, like to bring attention to themselves, while those that do not stand to benefit may not only provide more coverage but more negative coverage as well (Colistra, 2012).

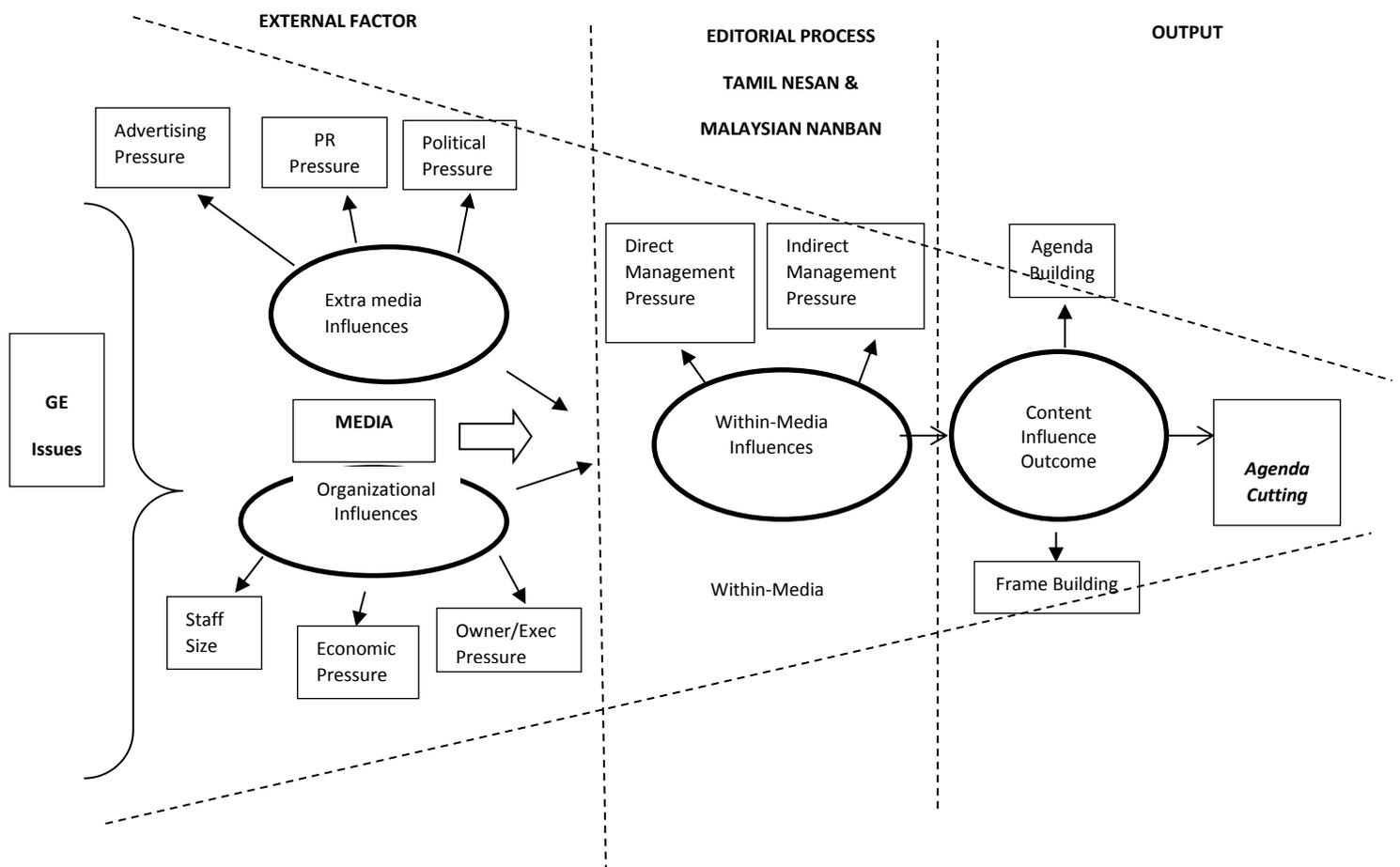


Figure 2: Agenda Cutting in Tamil Newspaper During Malaysian GE 13. Modified and Adapted from Colistra (2012), p. 118

A similar study was also found in Latif and Ibrahim’s (2012) research, where they examined decision making in the newsroom and influences of government policies in Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) (government-owned media organisation) and Astro Awani (paid-media organisation) in Malaysia. They found that internal forces that affect the news

decision for both media organisations (i.e., RTM and Astro Awani) include inexperience and new staff, minister's interference, staff unwilling to adapt to changes and internal censorship, while external forces include Bernama stories, government as stakeholders, advertisements, guidelines from the government and stakeholders. Their findings are somewhat relevant to the variables examined in agenda cutting (Figure 2).

As a conclusion, Agenda Setting focused on the power of the media in forming an opinion on any issue. This means that there is selection of issues to be highlighted by the media. However, what about news that were not highlighted or were given no coverage at all? The gap in the study therefore leads to new studies on agenda cutting focusing on issues that are not selected or highlighted by the media, the process of agenda cutting and the factors that lead to agenda cutting.

#### HYPOTHESIS

1. MIC's Facebook and Tamil newspapers employed news cutting policy during GE13.
2. There is no significant difference between Indian media agenda and Indian public agenda during GE13.

The first hypothesis postulates *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysia Nanban*, and MIC's Facebook have employed news cutting policy during 2013 election campaign period. The second hypothesis postulates whether there has been a significant difference between media agenda in Tamil newspapers and Malaysian Indian public agenda on the issues portrayed during election campaign period. Spearman's rho correlations test was employed to examine the hypothesis.

#### METHODOLOGY

Considering the main objectives of this research, in this study we use the content analysis method in order to understand the pattern of media coverage on issues portrayed in Tamil newspapers and Facebook during GE13. The study also attempts to understand the effects of media coverage in Tamil newspapers and on Facebook towards Malaysian Indians as the public. According to Holsti (1969), content analysis generally refers to any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of issues.

The sample for the study was collected from two Indian dailies in Malaysia, *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysia Nanban*. These Tamil newspapers were selected as the source data as they cater to the Indian ethnic community in Malaysia. Units of analysis for this study were news articles in the above said newspapers and Facebook accounts pertaining to the 13<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE13). Data was abstracted from the survey done in February, March, April and July 2013. A total of 1309 news articles from *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysia Nanban* and 111 postings on MIC's Facebook were identified and examined during the election campaign period from April 20 – May 6, 2013, specifically just before and soon after the election. A total of 127 Facebook accounts of MIC's candidates for state and parliamentary constituencies were examined during the same period.

Data collections were executed under a two-time series period beginning from 20<sup>th</sup> April 2013 to 28<sup>th</sup> April 2013 which was coded as T1, and between 29<sup>th</sup> April 2013 and 6<sup>th</sup> May 2013 which was coded as T2. Similarly, the two ethnic newspapers were coded as T1 for the first-week election campaign and T2 for the second-week election campaign. Code book

and code sheet were two important instruments for the content analysis of this study. The code sheet is a content analysis device and a recording tool for the coders while the code book is the operation manual to the device. Standardised coding sheet and coding book were used and these instruments were utilised to ensure that all coding tasks were carried out systematically. Hoslti's CR (1969) were used for the intercoder reliability test and the result has achieved 70 per cent and above of the agreement among the coders.

## FINDINGS

In this study, a total of 1309 news articles from *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysia Nanban* and 111 postings on MIC's Facebook were identified during the election campaign period from April 20 – May 6, 2013. This study has ranked 17 issues: (1) Politics; (2) Religion; (3) Crime; (4) Leadership; (5) Development Issues; (6) Government Administration; (7) National Security; (8) Social; (9) Environment; (10) Traffic Woes; (11) Economy; (12) Education; (13) National Unity; (14) Nationalism; (15) Health Issues; (16) International Relations; and (17) Immigrants in terms of their importance in the news coverage of Tamil newspapers and MIC's Facebook.

Overall, there was a slight variation among the newspapers and Facebook in covering these issues during the election campaign period. In detail, issues pertaining to politics which concerns party manifesto, new candidates or parties in the election, phantom voters, the integrity of Election Commission (EC), the polling date and date of the dissolution of Parliament, etc. were significantly ranked first by both Tamil newspapers. However, out of the 17 examined issues eight issues (i.e., crime, social, environment, national unity, nationalism, health issues, international relations and immigrants) were not reported by these Indian dailies.

Table 2: Ranking of Issues Covered in Tamil Newspapers and MIC's Facebook during 2013 Election Campaign Period (April 20 – May 6, 2013)

Issue	Tamil Nesan & Malaysia Nanban	MIC's Facebook
Crime	0	0
Development issues	8*	6
Economy	2	4
Education	8*	3
Environment	0	6
Government administration	8*	0
Health Issues	0	0
Immigrants	0	0
International relations	0	0
Leadership	0	0
National security	4	0
National unity	0	7*
Nationalism	0	0
Politics	1	1
Religion	4	7*
Social	0	2
Traffic woes	8*	0

Note: \* indicates that they are given equal importance in the coverage.

A similar result can also be found on MIC's parliamentary and state seat candidates' Facebook. Issues about politics were also ranked first during the campaign period on Facebook. As far as cutting or keeping issues off the agenda is concerned, nine issues (i.e.,

crime, nationalism, health issues, international relations, leadership, national security, government administration, traffic woes and immigrants) had been identified; some matched with the issues that were kept off the Tamil newspapers. Interestingly, crime-related issues, which were considered as an important agenda that should have been reported by the dailies, were not covered during the election campaign period. This indicates the existence of agenda cutting in Tamil newspapers and MIC's Facebook during election campaign period. Table 2 shows the ranking of issues covered in Tamil newspapers and MIC's Facebook respectively.

A survey was also conducted during the election period to examine the issues that were considered as vital to the respondents. In the survey, respondents were asked an open-ended question, requiring them to indicate a single issue that they felt affected the country the most. The authors grouped the issues into 17 categories as what was done similarly in the content analysis grouping. Based on the survey's analyses, crime was ranked the most important agenda by the respondents followed by national security, traffic woes and politics (Table 3).

This study then descriptively compared the ranking of issues in Indian newspapers and Facebook media agenda with Indian respondents in order to understand the importance that the respective newspapers and the respondents ranked on issues. Table 4 shows that although the Indian respondents ranked crime as the number one issue facing the country, both Tamil newspapers and Facebook kept away from the agenda. Neither the newspapers nor Facebook covered crime issues during the election campaign period. Respondents ranked national security, which concerns border intrusion, abolishment of Internal Security Act, Israel/Rohingya/Syria issues, brutal wars, the issue of state security, population issues (densely populated) and the Lahad Datu intrusion as the number two issue facing the nation. Tamil newspapers ranked the same issue as fourth, whereas Facebook did not cover any news about national security.

Table 3: Ranking of Issues Malaysian Indian during 2013 Election Campaign Period (April 20 – May 6, 2013)

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Indian</b>
Crime	1
Development issues	10
Economy	6
Education	15
Environment	9
Government administration	13
Health issues	11*
Immigrants	11*
International relations	17
Leadership	8
National security	2
National unity	7
Nationalism	16
Politics	4
Religion	14
Social	5
Traffic woes	3

Note: \* indicates that they are given equal importance in the coverage.

The first hypothesis postulates that *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysia Nanban*, and MIC's Facebook employed news cutting policy during 2013 election campaign period. Based on the media agenda in Tamil newspapers and MIC's Facebook, it is clear that agenda cutting did occur on these two platforms. Based on the analyses above, the eight issues that were completely ignored by the two Tamil newspapers during election campaign period are in line with the explication by Wober and Gunter (1988) that agenda cutting might occur in three ways: (1) by placing an item low on the news agenda (burying it), (2) by removing it from agenda once it is there, or (3) by completely ignoring it by never placing it on the agenda in the first place.

Table 4: Descriptively Comparing the Media Agenda and Public Agenda during 2013 Election Campaign Period (April 20 – May 6, 2013)

Issue	Tamil Nesan & Malaysia Nanban	MIC's Candidates Facebook	Indian Respondents
Crime	0	0	1
Development issues	8*	6	10
Economy	2	4	6
Education	8*	3	15
Environment	0	6	9
Government administration	8*	0	13
Health issues	0	0	11*
Immigrants	0	0	11*
International relations	0	0	17
Leadership	0	0	8
National security	4	0	2
National unity	0	7*	7
Nationalism	0	0	16
Politics	1	1	4
Religion	4	7*	14
Social	0	2	5
Traffic woes	8*	0	3

Note: \* indicates that they are given equal importance in the coverage.

The second hypothesis postulates whether there was a significant difference between media agenda in Tamil newspapers and Malaysian Indian public agenda on the issues portrayed during the election campaign period. Spearman's rho correlations test was employed to examine the hypothesis. The result shows that there is no significant difference between media agenda in Tamil newspapers and Malaysian Indian public agenda on the issues portrayed during election campaign period ( $r = .239, p = >.05$ ) (see Table 5).

Table 5: Malaysian Tamil Media and Indian Public Agenda on the Issues Portrayed During Election Campaign Period

			Tamil Media Agenda	PA Feb Indian	PA March Indian	PA April Indian
<b>Spearman's rho</b>	Tamil media agenda	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.106	.236	.239
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.	.342	.181	.178
		N	17	17	17	17
	PA Feb Indian	Correlation Coefficient	.106	1.000	.826	.741
Sig. (1-tailed)		.342	.	.000	.000	
N		17	17	17	17	
	PA March Indian	Correlation Coefficient	.236	.826	1.000	.885
Sig. (1-tailed)		.181	.000	.	.000	
N		17	17	17	17	
	PA April Indian	Correlation Coefficient	.239	.741	.885	1.000
Sig. (1-tailed)		.178	.000	.000	.	
N		17	17	17	17	

Note: PA stands for public agenda.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In general, the Indian community issues are not categorically unique nor any different from those experienced by other ethnic groups in this country. As corroborated by the ranking of important public issues (see Table 3), apparently the most pressing matters for the everyday-defined social reality of every Indian are related to a negative perception on security. Ideally, such a sense of insecurity arising from the rise in criminality, a threat to national security and the failure of the country's road traffic system, should be dealt with by the authorities concerned whereby dialogues from various parties should be mediated within the public sphere. Evidently, however, the print and social media behaved indifferently and instead pursued an arguably pre-ordained set of news salience for their community to read and talk about. That such selective behaviour of the *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysia Nanban* editorials and MIC's Facebook seen during the GE13 election campaign period seems to suggest a play of "social amnesia" in the political (read "party") newsroom.

By imposing a definite closure on eight salient issues, namely; crime, social, environment, national unity, nationalism, health issues, international relations and immigrants; the gatekeepers could sway the focus from potentially angst-ridden community and national issues to the search for leadership and economic opportunities for the Malaysian Indian community as a whole. However, such exclusive and intensive framing of political and economic news in these newspapers is the privilege of the few as, Facebook aside, the readership of Tamil-medium newspapers continues to dwindle. In fact, a Nielsen's study recently observed a 7.1% fall of readership between 2012 and 2013 across 15 Malaysian dailies in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil from 9.81 million to 9.12 million.

Being the third largest ethnic group in the land, the Indian community has every right to know and participate in the community's leadership scenario. To give an example, in the run-up to GE13, one of the most critical challenges to the MIC leadership had come from a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF). HINDRAF

staged a major rally including their most memorable petition to reclaim USD4 trillion from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain, for “withdrawing after granting independence and leaving them (Indians) unprotected and at the mercy of a majority-Malay-Muslim government that has violated [their] rights as minority Indians” (see [www.policewatchmalaysia.com](http://www.policewatchmalaysia.com)). In hindsight, it is understandable why deploying agenda cutting to strategically frame their counter-argument became obviously critical for the newspaper editors. It was necessary at the time to prime the focus and opinion of the Indian community in support of the most dominant Indian party and its leadership.

One should always remember that keeping an everyday-defined issue or agenda off the public sphere does not ensure that it has been stemmed or silenced as the issue may appear in different avenue such as the social media. Interestingly, the gatekeepers of the MIC’s Facebook page had never thought of opening their platform to the true democratic practice of public opinion. They did not seem to see any other logic but the expedience of the party’s political agenda – a flawed policy, which consequently but not unsurprisingly saw their Facebook page draw an appalling 111 postings in an epoch where social media is the reigning conduit of opinion.

Without a flawed agenda cutting strategy, the MIC could have garnered valuable electoral votes during its GE13 campaign. For instance, the awareness about the plight of ‘stateless Indians’, those who have never left their ‘estate’ environment, resulting in the lack of exposure to other cultures, languages, education and source of identification, which have been raised for the last 5 years by independent media, academic society and NGOs, could have been shared on the MIC’s Facebook account. Moreover, there have been critical interventions by the MIC Youth, for example, to resolve the crisis of the ‘stateless Indians’ that should be shared by the social media gatekeepers as the party’s ‘little’ success stories especially in the context of human security. The fact that mutuality between media and public agenda is rather difficult to achieve during election campaigns, whilst not unexpected, remains rueful as it is decidedly against a win-win solution between media and public agenda. This seems to be the electoral drawback of exercising agenda cutting strategy by the Tamil newspapers and MIC’s Facebook during such an event.

This brief discussion has tried to discuss the first hypothesis, that is, the justifications together with the pros and cons in deploying ‘Agenda Cutting’ policy by *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysia Nanban* newspapers and the MIC’s Facebook during the GE13 campaign period. This is followed by highlighting the implication of the second hypothesis, that whilst there is no significant relation between media and public agenda, there is a need for gatekeepers, agenda-setters and cutters to reconcile interest of the party and public interests so that the Indian community and aspiring community leaders do not fall prey to self-destructive ignorance and myopia.

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