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### UMNO ELECTION 1987 : A DIFFUSION STUDY OF AN EXPECTED MAJOR NEWS EVENT

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Studies on news diffusion of major events have gained considerable degree of attention among communication scholars over the years. The field has been criticised at one time because the studies were duplicative and repetitive (Tannenbaum & Greenberg 1968) but there had been attempts to build generalisations and to formulate hypotheses (Rosengren, 1987).

Generally, studies on news diffusion of events can be divided into three. The first is the study of significant but unexpected events. The second is the study of minor but unexpected events, while the third is on the expected events. On a relative basis, there have been more studies conducted on news diffusion of major and minor unexpected events than studies on expected events. Some possible reasons can be given for this state of affairs. Perhaps scholars find studying unexpected events to be more challenging than focusing attention on the expected events. Another reason might be the mainstream mentality in which one scholar would assume it more trendy to be in tune with other scholars in doing research along a similar line. A third reason might be that there is nothing much that can be added to the studies on diffusion of news by studying expected events.

Studies on the diffusion of news have suggested that there is some regularity in the nature and pattern of spreading information on the events investigated. News on significant events have found to spread rapidly in the community, overriding even socio-economic differences. People have found the event to be relevant to themselves and others that they find it necessary to share information with others.

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The first well-known study on the diffusion of news was undertaken by Miller (1945) when he investigated the death of President Roosevelt. Since then interests have grown among scholars but the main portion of studies have been conducted in the United States. There have been studies made lately in Europe (Rosengren, 1987), in Mexico (Quarles et al, 1983) and Malaysia (Idid, 1983).

One characteristic that can be noted from the various findings on studying major events, is that news transmission has been very rapid. Miller (1945) found that within an hour of a radio announcement a total of 91 percent of respondents heard of the event.

The rapidity and pervasiveness of unexpected major events were also evident from several studies on the assassination of President Kennedy. A study by Banta (1964) found that 93 percent of the population of Dallas heard of Kennedy's death within an hour after it was publicly announced.

Two other studies also indicated the pervasiveness of the news diffusion of significant events. The news on the attempted assassination attempt on President Reagan was spread rapidly. Another study on the death of Malaysia's second prime minister, Tun Abdul Razak, who passed away in London also indicated a similar trend. The study among Malaysian students in Madison, Wisconsin, United States, found that within an hour 80 percent of the respondents heard of the event.

Another characteristic of the diffusion of news on significant events was the channel used in the transmission of news. The studies done so far (Miller, 1945; Banta, 1964; Feldman and Sheatsley, 1964; Greenberg, 1964; Schramm, 1976; Idid, 1976; 1981) have indicated the interpersonal role of word of mouth over mass media. In the studies cited, the news was said to spread faster by word of mouth rather than by the electronic or print media.

Following several studies, scholars have accepted the regularity hypothesis, namely, that the greater the news value of an event, the greater would be the transmission of news, and the greater would news be transmitted by word of mouth than by the mass media.

Scholars have pointed out that the criteria of an event being regarded as major or minor are dependent on several factors. Major news events have been found to spread faster, and are more pervasive than minor events. Scholars have also found that news events are also known among those who regard them as being personally relevant to them (Adams, Mullen and Wilson, 1969).

Social and structural factors are also said to contribute toward the rapid diffusion of news. When respondents are grouped together, news is more likely to spread, as for example, within the campus community (Idid 1983; Miller, 1945). Structural factors, nature of news sources and media coverage of events can also determine the rate and spread of diffusion (Rosengren 1973).

The role of media in transmitting news has also been regarded as integral in studying news diffusion. The time in calculating news diffusion has in most cases, been from the moment news is beamed from the electronic or/and splashed in the print media. This does not detract from several studies (however limited the number) that took into consideration non-media sources in calculating the beginning of news diffusion (Idid, 1983).

Among media forms, the electronic media were regarded as first sources of information (Greenberg, 1964). The print media, because of their technical limitations, were of lesser importance in the spread of significant events than the electronic media. Many of the events studied took place after the printing deadline of newspapers, as for example during the late morning or at night. The constraints of technology make newspapers "slow" in being able

to spread the news of events, especially when the events were to occur during the night.

As alluded above, studies on news diffusion of anticipated events have been largely ignored. Scholars generally prefer to study the diffusion of unexpected major events. Bogart (1951) studied the spread of news of a local event and found that the event lacked widespread interest within the local community. The news was found to spread very slowly among the respondents.

Another anticipated event recorded more response. A study on the heavy weight boxing between Clay and Liston in February, 1964 found that the anticipated event was diffused widely and was immediate. People waited for the day and time of the fight to see what the outcome would be. The main source of information was the electronic media. A total of 77 percent of the knowers learned about the event from radio, 8 percent from television, 8 percent from other persons, 4 percent from the newspapers and 3 percent were indefinite (Greenberg, Brinton and Farr, 1965).

Scholars are therefore not certain on the pattern and spread of anticipated events. It can command wide interest as evidenced by the Clay-Liston fight or may be disregarded as instanced by the study made by Bogart (1950/1).

Studies on anticipated events can contribute to further understanding of the nature of news diffusion. It is not certain as yet whether there is regularity in the diffusion of news of anticipated events, be they significant or not, or whether they can, on their own, indicate their own diffusion process. The UMNO General Assembly in 1987 afforded an opportunity to study the diffusion of news of a significant but anticipated event. The event was very significant to a majority of Malaysians, more so among the Malays. There were indications that there would be a major tussle for power during the forthcoming general assembly. Many Malaysians were keen to know the outcome of the fight among the power contenders. The outcome of the party election had far-reaching political implications for the country.

## **Background**

Traditionally, the triennial general assembly of the United Malays National Organisations (UMNO) where Malaysia's dominant political party elected its leaders, had always been a tame affair. The two top posts of the president and the deputy president were never challenged, or merely given a semblance of opposition. This was not to be the case in the 1987 General Assembly. The scenario for a stiff challenge to the presidency began in early 1986 when the then Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Musa Hitam, (then Deputy President of UMNO), resigned from both his party and Cabinet post. Apparently, Datuk Musa took the drastic step because of serious policy and personal differences against Prime Minister and Party President, Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamed. After much persuasion by a delegation from the UMNO Supreme Council, Datuk Musa withdrew his resignation from the party leadership post, but would not be persuaded about his Cabinet post. It was a stalemate.

Events indicated the formation of two camps within UMNO. Supporters began to align themselves to support Mahathir or Musa. To the general public the party put up a united face, but underneath, several top party leaders and cabinet ministers were strong supporters of Datuk Musa. Leading Datuk Musa's struggle were Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Ajib Ahmad, and Welfare Minister, Datuk Shahrir Samad. Both were concurrently the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of Johore UMNO Liaison Committee. Both had served as Datuk Musa's political secretary before moving up the party hierarchy.

Against this scenario were several negative events like the BMF scandal, the coopera-

tives scandal, and the Maminco affair coupled with the recession which saw many of Malaysia's primary commodities suffered falling in terms of price in the world market. As a result many workers were retrenched, new job seekers found it difficult to get employment and the country's economy was not developing as well as before. Many companies went bust, others lapsed in their loans, and, several banks had to be saved by Bank Negara, the central bank. All in all it was not a happy picture for the country's leaders.

Amidst all these problems, and with the opposition parties, especially the Democratic Action Party (DAP) calling for greater accountability of the government, the Prime Minister called for a snap general election in August 1986, almost a full year short of the five-year term of the current Parliamentary session. It was clear that the government wanted a fresh mandate from the people. However, there were also speculations that the UMNO leadership wanted to get the general elections out of the way first, as otherwise it would be difficult to have two elections - the country's general elections and the party's General Assembly - in the same year, 1987. Notwithstanding all the big issues, Barisan Nasional was swept back to power in the country's general elections. Although Barisan Nasional lost a few seats, mainly through the defeat of Malaysian Chinese Association's candidates, UMNO's own performance was nothing short of spectacular. It won 83 of the 84 seats contested.

Following this major victory, UMNO held its annual general assembly in September 1986. Probably because of this major victory, some fireworks expected at the meeting did not materialise, but there were some rumblings of unhappiness that the two top leaders in UMNO, namely Mahathir and Musa, were not on good terms anymore. However, for the benefit of the delegates, both leaders showed some semblance of mock friendliness. But 1986 was not an election year for UMNO.

Up until January 1987, Mahathir did not appear to be seriously challenged. Musa was thought of as a probable contender because of his seniority. But a series of meetings between Musa and Tengku Razaleigh, who stood twice against Musa and lost, paved the way for a closing of ranks between the two arch rivals, and the possibility of pooling their supporters to oust the incumbent leadership of Mahathir.

The coming together of these two rival leaders, with their string of supporters at the federal, state, and divisional levels, posed a serious attempt to the UMNO leadership in the 41-year history of the party. Even though there was a lot of campaigning by what came to be known later as Tengku Razaleigh-Musa team, Tengku Razaleigh himself did not announce his acceptance of candidacy until April 11, 1987. It should be noted that, prior to the General Assembly, divisional meetings were held to elect delegates to the assembly. It was at divisional meetings that members or committees proposed names for the leadership. In the run-up to the election, Mahathir received 88 nominations while Tengku Razaleigh 37.

For the first time, Malaysians, particularly the Malays, began to see the tradition of not challenging the top leadership being broken. Some hailed this as a move toward democratising UMNO. Apparently, this challenge was not unnoticed by the news media. Newspapers, especially those owned partly by UMNO, like *Berita Harian*, the *New Straits Times*, *Utusan Malaysia*, and other independent newspapers as well, like the *Watan*, *Mingguan Tanahair* were replete with news of the inevitable showdown. Malaysia's only private TV station, TV3, another property partly owned by UMNO, also reported extensively although rather one-sidedly about the challenge. All in all it was a well-reported affair. It could be assumed that few people would miss reading the extensive coverage. It could also be assumed that the general public would discuss the impending UMNO election among

friends and family members.

Hence, our assumption that a large number of people would be very interested in the outcome of the results of the UMNO election because of the controversy generated and the significance of the outcome to all. It was also announced earlier that Radio Television Malaysia (RTM), the government TV station, would announce the results live from Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC), the venue of the election.

### **Present study**

This study was interested to investigate how the results of the UMNO general elections were known by the Malaysian public. For the purpose of this study four areas were selected to probe how respondents learnt of the results.

A total of 175 respondents were personally interviewed. Four areas - two in the urban and the remaining two from the rural areas - were selected for this survey. Dato Keramat and Kampong Baru in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur were regarded as urban areas while Kampong Rinching Dalam and Bandar Bangi (Lama) in Selangor were classified as rural areas. An equal number of respondents were selected from the two areas.

Only male Malays were interviewed in these predominantly Malay areas. The survey decided only on Malay respondents because UMNO is a Malay-based party although admittedly what was going on in UMNO attracted considerable interest among the non-Malays too. The respondents were randomly selected through systematic sampling. Under this procedure, depending on the study location, the interviewers were told to skip a certain number of houses to select the respondents.

The respondents were administered a questionnaire that probed the time they heard of the election results, source of information, and their behaviour on learning the news. Socio-demographic details of the respondents were also obtained. The cooperation received from the respondents was very good. Their ages ranged from 18 years to 71 years. A total of 49 percent were aged 33 years and below.

The 2-day study was made 7 days after the UMNO general assembly.

### **Results**

News diffusion of the UMNO election was widespread and almost immediate. The majority heard of the news on the night the announcement was made. A total of 73 percent heard about the event from 10.45pm till midnight. The official announcement was made live over Radio and Television Malaysia by the Chairman of the Conference at 10.45 pm. Thus within 1 hour and 15 minutes the majority of respondents had already known of the event. The bulk of the respondents (35 percent) heard the election results at 10.45 p.m., that is from the live announcement made at the conference room.

The study did not find any difference in the time respondents in both the rural and urban areas learnt of the elections. This was possible because both the areas had easy access to all forms of mass media. All the respondents owned a television set in their homes.

### **Media Sources of Information**

The results indicated that respondents obtained their information about the election from media sources. Interpersonal sources of information were negligible.

Among the media sources, the government-owned Radio and Television Malaysia

accounted for the single most-mentioned source. A total of 82 percent of respondents heard the news of the election results for the first time from RTM. The private-owned TV3 was mentioned by 6 percent of respondents, newspapers by 9 percent and only 3 percent of respondents cited friends as their source of information.

As mentioned earlier, the bulk of respondents (35 percent) learned of the news at 10.45 p.m. All of the 35 percent obtained their information from Radio and Television Malaysia. The greatest possible reason one could offer for this phenomenon was that RTM was the only station to cover the event live, and thus attracted the public's interest.

Respondents resorted to other mass media forms to obtain more information about the election results. A majority (67 percent) cited newspapers as an additional source of information by which they obtained information. The next major source of information cited was friends (19 percent), followed by Radio and Television Malaysia. It was obvious that additional information were only sought the next day as evidenced by respondents citing newspapers and RTM. It was also obvious that no additional information would be forthcoming from another source during the same night.

The majority of respondents obtained their information from their respective homes, that is, either during the election night or the following day. Respondents' need for additional information came mainly from the following morning's newspapers.

### Discussion

The findings of this study reflect certain similarities with other studies pertaining to diffusion of news of significant events. The UMNO election was, however, a significant event that was expected to happen unlike previous studies on diffusion that were mainly conducted on unanticipated events.

The time of day the event occurred and reported was an important determinant in the study of news diffusion. In this study, the spread of news was fast. Within 75 minutes, a total of 73 percent heard the news of the election results. The total spread was as fast as in other studies on unexpected but significant events. Given the findings in this study on the results of UMNO elections, one is left to postulate whether there was really any difference between the pervasiveness and spread of unexpected and expected news events. News spreads fast and wide if it is significant irrespective whether it is expected or unexpected.

The time of occurrence also affected somewhat the source of information. The deaths of Roosevelt and Kennedy were known in the daytime and the news was spread initially by radio and hastened by interpersonal communication. In the study on the death of Anwar Sadat, the report of the Egyptian president's death was mainly heard by respondents from the radio (Idid, 1983). Interpersonal communication was not so important in spreading the news as compared with the electronic media because of the factor of time. In this study, the results of UMNO elections were obtained from the electronic media. The spread was not hastened by interpersonal communication. In both the studies the death of Anwar Sadat and UMNO election - the two events were known at night. One can therefore deduce that if an event - either expected or unexpected - happened or were reported at night the electronic media would be the main conveyor of news and would also account for its spread and speed.

The present study has its own limitations. It was conducted in two areas. Only male Malays were chosen. Future studies might enlarge the sample size and cover a bigger area. The study on diffusion of news is an interesting one and promises more insights to how news is spread. It is immaterial whether studies in diffusion of news be made of unexpected or

expected events. Both can promote more insights with diffusion studies.

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