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THE MEDIA AGENDA OF THE NEW AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA IN MALAYSIA: CONSTRUCTING REALITIES

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ABSTRACT

Mass media have always been constructing reality. Each media constructs different versions of reality which plays according to the tune of the media owners. With the rise of the new media, the reading public now has a different source of information about the existing realities. This study analyzes the different agendas of the new and traditional media. Four printed newspapers and four online newspapers were selected for this study. A content analysis of the different media was carried. The findings indicate that the different media projects different agenda. The constructed agenda reflect the prevailing philosophy the owners of these media.

Keywords: Media, reality, traditional media, new media, media agenda

INTRODUCTION

Mass media have always been constructing reality. Each media constructs a particular different version of reality which may defer from societal realities. The constructed reality follows the version the media owners want to create. Thus, owners of traditional media such as newspaper, magazine, radio and television broadcast will be able exert their influence the reporting of events by their respective media. They literally decide what can or cannot be published or broadcasted. The hands of the owner, in the day to day running of the media organization, orchestrating the ways the news stories are reported can hardly be seen. The media managers that the owners appoint will undertake these duties routinely. These appointed media managers understand and execute policies according to the needs of the owners. In doing so, they thrust the chosen agenda to the media audience.

Before the advent of the Internet with all its converging technologies, traditional media are more likely to be successful in transmitting its agenda on the general publics. The massive capital investment needed to set up traditional media limits the number and type of mass media

that are made available to members of society. The growth of alternative traditional mass media is further limited in developing countries due to the restrictive regulations. Various permits and licenses are needed before any new mass media can start doing business. Thus, media owners need to link up with members of the ruling government to facilitate the process of procuring these permits and licenses. Mainstream newspapers such as *Utusan Malaysia*, *Berita Harian*, *New Straits Times* and *The Star* are owned by people who are linked with the ruling coalition that has been ruling Malaysia since independence.

In such a scenario, media owners are more likely to be elite members of a society. As societal elite, they could exert their personal agenda on general members of society.

The convergent of the various computer, broadcast and telecommunication technologies that gave rise to the Internet have changed the media landscape. The Internet enables new startup companies with limited capital to create and setup their own online newspaper and offer these new products to the general public. In Malaysia, the decision made by the Mahathir's administration that the Internet will not be censored has given rise to the flourishing growth of online newspapers. The Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Act 588), section 3(3) states that "Nothing in this Act shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the Internet."

The act was published in the Malaysian *Gazette* on 15 October 1998 and this marks the beginning of the democratization of the media space in this state. The Malaysian public is no longer restricted to the number or type of traditional mass media that are available in the country. The Malaysian public can now access new homegrown online newspapers such as *Malaysiakini.com*. *Malaysiakini.com* was launched on November 20, 1999. *Malaysiakini.com* now offers daily news and views in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. The online news portal was founded by Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran, both were formerly working with *The Sun*.

The opposition parties such as Parti Islam Semalaysia (PAS), Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Malaysia and other political parties are also using this loophole in the law to set up and publish their own party organs online. Online newspapers are not subjected to the clauses of the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984 (Act 301) that requires publishers to obtain a permit before they can publish printed newspapers. The amendments of the Printing Presses and Publication Act (Amendments) 2012 no longer require publishers to renew their publishing permit. The amended Section 12 of the Act states that "A license or permit granted under this Act shall be subject to such conditions as may be endorsed in the license or permit and shall remain valid for so long as it is not revoked." In the case of PAS, *Harakah*, the party printed newspaper requires a publishing permit but the online newspaper, *Harakahdaily*, does not require one.

Although the amendment to the act resolves the need of applying a new publishing permit annually, but the law still require any organizations that wish to publish a printed newspaper to apply and obtain a permit before they can do so.

The Internet has given rise to a host of new mass media. One of the most important developments that have a powerful effect on the way newspaper publishers do their business is blog. Blog, initially, started off as an online diary written by individual as a mean to share their stories with their close friends. Today, blog has evolved into a discussion or informational site that allows visitors to comment and even message each other. Originally blogs are written and managed by individuals, like the case of *Malaysia Today* which is published by Raja Petra Kamarudin. He began publishing his blog on November 22, 2004 and today his blog is noted for its critical stance towards both the Barisan Nasional, the ruling coalition and Pakatan Rakyat, the loose coalition of opposition parties. *Malaysia Today* uses the tagline, "Your Source of Independent News." While it is no longer using the tagline, but it still defines itself as an online news portal. The use of the term news on blogs has a profound effect on the definition of news among the general publics. News stories are no longer objective reports of reality. Previously, the sanctity of the news story is a highly cherished virtue and no editors will allow the viewpoints of the reporter to be included in the news.

The rise of blogs has redefined the term news and the way media organizations operate. Bloggers who publish news stories will do so with their opinion clearly stated in every posting. They are doing this without any reservations and they make their stand on any particular issue openly for everyone to read. The strength of blogs is the high level of interaction between readers and bloggers. Readers either agree or disagree with the published subject matter and they are allowed to post their comments on the chosen issue for all to see. The high level of interactivity between the bloggers and their readers is a new phenomenon that has never seen since the advent of the printed media. Thus readers of blogs not only read the posting by the blogger but also the thread of discussion offered by other readers for a particular issue. Readers are attracted to these blogs because of the perceived credibility of the bloggers and alternative viewpoints on a particular issue. Readers of blogs do not have to pay to read any entry in these blogs. This adds to the attractiveness of blogs to the general publics.

These constructed online agenda which are promoted in blogs and online newspapers are competing with the constructed agenda of the offline news media. The general reading publics are now given not one but a myriad sources of information about the existing realities. They are spoilt with numerous sources of information. The cumulative effects of all these is that the multifaceted and complex Malaysian publics are exposed to various mainstream and alternative agenda published by the various mass media because the Government has agreed not to censor the Internet.

This study compares the agendas of the mainstream media to that of the agenda of the new media such as online newspapers and blogs. The constructed agenda published online is termed in this paper as the alternative agenda. Does the alternative agenda differ from agenda of mainstream offline newspapers? Are there any similarities between the agenda of the offline with the online media? This is the basic premise of this exploratory paper. By doing so, we are evaluating the contribution of the new media agenda for the purpose of reformulating the agenda setting theory. This is necessary because the original agenda setting theory as formulated by McCombs and Shaw is grounded on the constructed agenda of traditional media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study on mass media has grown in leaps and bounds ever since McCombs and Shaw's (1972, 1993) formulation of agenda-setting function of the mass media (McLeod et al 1974, Rogers et al 1993). Many inputs towards the formulation of the theory have been contributed by scholars (see Broerse et al. 2010, Brosius & Kepplinger 1990, Curtin 1999, 2001). Studies done have shown the relationship between media agenda and public relations agenda (Gans 2004, Sallot & Johnson 2006), media agenda and public policy (Shiffman 2008, McCullum et al 2003), media agenda and international policy (Palmer et al. 1999, Lewis & Considine 1999) and presidential election (Kioussis & Shields 2008).

What are the similarities between all these studies? These studies look at the agenda offered by traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television (Kosicki 1993). Thus there is a need to analyze and compared the agendas promoted in offline and online media.

METHOD

This study analyzed the different constructed agendas of the new and traditional media. Four printed newspapers and four Internet news media were selected for this study. The four printed newspapers that are placed under the lens for scrutiny are *Utusan Malaysia*, *Berita Harian*, *New Straits Times* and *The Star*. The front pages of these newspapers that were published from March 2 to March 8, 2012 were content analyzed.

The four Internet news media which were examined for this study are *Harakahdaily*, *Malaysiakini.com*, *Malaysia Today* and *MBakriMusa.com*. The webpages of the online media was coded at 12 noon during the period of March 2 to March 8, 2012. Due to the evolving nature of online web content, the researchers felt that the selected time would reflect the most current information that is being published by a particular webpage.

With the continuous updating of stories appearing on *Harakahdaily* and *Malaysiakini.com*, we agree to code only stories that were published on the same day. This is because both newspapers published both today and yesterday news on any particular day. Coding of items on both online newspapers is done using the published datelines that appear together with the news stories. Thus stories that have yesterday datelines are not coded again to prevent double counting of items.

In coding of items published in *Malaysia Today*, the researchers have decided not to code news items that were obtained from other online resources. We have decided that coding such items will amount to double counting because the items were source from another website. We only coded articles that were personally written by Raja Petra Kamarudin. The same method was employed to content analyzed items appearing on *MBakriMusa.com*.

The analysis of the various media reveal similarities between the different constructed agendas. With the knowledge about the philosophical groundings of the various media, we will be able to comprehend why these media have chosen to promote the constructed agenda.

RESULTS

During the period of study a total of 115 stories appeared in the four mainstream newspapers. This is much bigger than the total stories published by the alternative media combined. The total number of stories published by the new media for the period under study is 31 items. Refer to Table 1.

Table 1: Items published by both offline and online news media

| News media | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <i>The Star</i> | 34 | 23.28 |
| <i>BeritaHarian</i> | 33 | 48.18 |
| <i>New Straits Times</i> | 29 | 19.86 |
| <i>Utusan Malaysia</i> | 19 | 13.01 |
| <i>Harakahdaily.com</i> | 13 | 8.90 |
| <i>Malaysiakini.com</i> | 10 | 6.84 |
| <i>Malaysia Today</i> | 7 | 4.79 |
| <i>MBakriMusa.com</i> | 1 | 0.68 |
| TOTAL | 146 | 100.00 |

Although a lot of news items were published by the respective media, the analysis showed a prevailing trend in the reporting of several news media, particularly among the mainstream

newspapers. On further scrutinizing of the data, it showed that the mainstream newspapers were united in highlighting the political tussle that is happening within the Pas ruled Kedah Government. The mainstream emphasized the internal political struggle that is occurring in the administration of the Pas led government of Kedah. During the period, a total of 14 stories were published by the mainstream newspapers to negatively portrayed the Pas led Kedah government. These stories suggest the weaknesses of chosen *Menteri Besar* of Kedah which is from Pas. The negative portrayal of Pas in the mainstream newspapers is expected due to the opposing camps that the owners of these media are in.

This is much bigger compared to the only story about the Pas led government Kedah appearing in Harakahdaily.com. Refer to Table 2. The lack of unity among the alternative media to counter the onslaught of the mainstream media against Pas is an opportunity lost. The lack of unity should come as no surprise as the owners of these new media are not linked in any way either economically, socially or politically. Thus, they can choose to publish or project a particular issue according to any particular ideological or philosophical grounding.

Table 2: Items relating to the conflict within the Pas led Kedah Government

| News media | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <i>The Star</i> | 3 | 20.00 |
| <i>BeritaHarian</i> | 3 | 20.00 |
| <i>New Straits Times</i> | 3 | 20.00 |
| <i>Utusan Malaysia</i> | 5 | 33.33 |
| <i>Harakahdaily.com</i> | 1 | 6.67 |
| TOTAL | 15 | 100.00 |

The analysis showed that the mainstream newspapers were united in promoting a particular agenda. This did not occur with the alternative news media. The various alternative media were promoting different agenda. This should not come as a surprise because these media are not under the purview of the same owner. Unlike the new media, the owners of the traditional newspapers are owned by people who are linked to the ruling coalition. The traditional newspapers have been around for a long time, thus, they are able to project the same agenda across the different newspapers.

CONCLUSION

The advent of blogs enables anybody to start offering their views or “news” to the numerous reading cyber publics. This leads to the redefinition of what is news. News is no longer objective reporting of events that are newsworthy published by print and electronic media. In other words,

news is tied to the medium that is offering it. News today can constitute of any important information which allows for opinions to be injected into a news piece. Juxtaposition of information and facts with comment will mean that readers will have difficulty to discern the truth from the facts presented. Thus, the rise of new media may have effectively ended the monopolization of the media space by the traditional media in espousing any agenda. All these changes have a powerful effect in disrupting the news monopoly among big media corporations. They are no longer able to promote their agenda to their general public freely.

What is not surprising is that the constructed agendas being promoted by the countless online media are too disparate and unrelated. If we were to include the various agendas being circulated within the numerous social networking sites, we will see greater divergent of viewpoints. This exploratory study concludes that mainstream traditional media have an edge over the new media in promoting a particular agenda. Although the mainstream traditional media in Malaysia are operated by different companies but they have linked to the ruling coalition. Thus, they are united in promoting a chosen agenda.

Thus the move by the big media organizations in Malaysia to set up their own online newspapers version is correct. Although they are forced to do so because less and less people are buying their printed newspapers, their quick actions to reverse the tide should be commendable. They understood that losing readers is the beginning of a vicious cycle that could lead to the demise of a media corporation. A drop in readership will see a decline in advertising revenues. The continued decline in revenues will hit publishers where it matters most, the profit margins. To circumvent the loss of readers and the decline in advertising revenues, traditional offline media owners are aggressively making their presence felt on the Internet. Although the online versions are not generating enough income at the moment for publishers of traditional media operators but they will not shy away from the Internet. They are bracing the Internet with a purpose: to espouse their selected agenda to the various targeted publics. They are able to continue sustaining themselves with the backing that they received from their political masters.

Promoting their political masters agenda is easier for traditional media owners in Malaysia. Although they are still working hard to comprehend the economics of publishing on the new platform, they are successful in promoting their constructed agenda due to their well-known brand. Mainstream newspapers such as *Utusan Malaysia*, *Berita Harian*, *New Straits Times* and *The Star*, are known to the local audiences. Thus readers can easily relate the offline version with the online versions of these media. If these readers were to go online, they are expected to continue surfing the online versions of these traditional media. The migration of readers from offline to online media will definitely have a powerful effect on the accumulative agenda that will linger on top of the minds of the Internet readers. Studies will have to be conducted to confirm this assumption. In other words, owners of traditional media can continue

to promote the constructed offline agenda to their online public using their online news media. Such a scenario will mean that the various reading publics will not have fully benefitted from the democratization of the media space with the advent of the Internet.

The practical implication of these findings is the ability to understand the effects of various agenda on top of the minds of the publics. In this context, political parties who are using the Internet to promote their respective agenda will need to coordinate their persuasive campaigns across all the available media. The ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, understood this requirement and they have a long history of promoting themselves. The constructed agenda of their offline media is highly consistent with the agenda of their online media.

What is inherently missing in the original formulation of the agenda setting theory is the contribution of the agenda construction of new media on top of the minds of the various media audiences? This exploratory study looks at the different agendas of the various media; the next step is to link this finding with the agenda of the people reading these media. Future research needs to address this shortcoming by conducting a survey of the agenda that is top of the mind for any selected publics.

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