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Who Sets The Agenda? Locating the Formation of Public Opinion during the Rantau By-Election

Shafizan Mohamed*
Syed Arabi Idid**

Abstract: This paper investigates whether online news that are shared on Facebook set the agenda for its readers. In response to the importance of social networking sites as sources of information, news media organizations have set up Facebook channels in which they publish news stories or links to articles. This allows for a wider news reach as well as audience participation. When audience members read and subsequently comment on news articles on Facebook, it becomes possible to identify public opinions and sentiments on the issues being covered. To investigate whether user comments mirror the issues and sentiments presented in the news articles, the agenda-setting approach was applied. Content analysis was used to analyse audience comments on over 450 news articles from 4 major newspapers written during the Rantau by-election in Malaysia (April, 2019). The findings showed that while the newspapers and the readers do share some issue salience, the relationship does not typify a traditional agenda-setting dynamic. The news readers are not just the ones receiving the news and issues. Rather, they are also commenters who are influencing how others receive news and issues hence disrupting the conventional public opinion model.

Keywords: Agenda setting, Election, Facebook, News Commenters, Online News, Political Communication, Public Opinion

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Abstrak: Kertas kajian ini meninjau sama ada berita diatas talian yang dikongsikan di Facebook menetapkan agenda para pembacanya. Disebabkan kepentingan media social dalam menyebarkan maklumat, makin banyak syarikat media hari ini yang berkongsi berita mereka di Facebook. Ini mampu menarik lebih ramai jumlah pembaca serta mendapatkan maklumbalas daripada para pembaca mengenai berita yang dibaca. Apabila para pembaca meninggalkan komen di ruangan yang disediakan, ia membolehkan para pengkaji mengetahui tentang sentimen pembaca serta pendapat umum mengenai isu politik nasional. Untuk mengetahui sama ada suratkhbar hari ini masih mampu menentukan agenda para pembacanya, teori ‘Agenda setting’ telah digunapakai. Analisis kandungan telah dijalankan ke atas 450 berita atas talian serta komentar pembaca ke atas berita tersebut. Berita-berita ini diambil dari 4 suratkhbar harian utama sepanjang musim kempen pilihanraya kecil Rantau (April, 2019). Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa suratkhbar dan pembacanya masih lagi berkongsi kepentingan isu namun perkongsian ini tidak lagi menggambarkan dinamika tradisional “Agenda setting”. Malah, para pembaca berita bukan sahaja membaca, mereka juga menulis serta berkongsi mengenai isu-isu yang tidak dibawa oleh berita yang dibaca. Para komentar ini turut mempengaruhi pendapat para pembaca yang lain sehingga mengganggu model pendapat umum yang konvensional.

Kata Kunci: Agenda setting, Pilihanraya, Facebook, Komentar Berita, Berita Atas Talian, Komunikasi Politik, Pendapat Umum

INTRODUCTION

The traditional way for readers to publicly comment on the news was to write to the newspaper editors. The creation of news websites and its advancement in late 1990s and particularly during the era of Web 2.0, the great social internet turn during the early 2000s, news organizations have allowed readers to express their opinions and perspectives, and to interact with other users through the comment section at the end of the online articles. (Kim, 2018). Like other forms of Web use over that time period, the growth in news comments has been extraordinary.

The rise of Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook and twitter had further allowed news organizations to engage with online audiences by encouraging them to read, comment, and share news with other users. Today, large numbers of news organizations extend their content and interactions on SNS to get connected to the larger audience. Facebook is generally the primary platform used by news organizations to share their news stories and to encourage user interaction (Al-Rawi,

2016). This shift towards encouraging news comments on Facebook is based on the implicit assumption that commenting on social media platforms, especially Facebook, is a better alternative for commenting on news organizations' websites (Kim, 2018). Many news organizations have suffered from irrelevant, uncivil, abusive, and aggressive comments on their websites because of the anonymous/pseudonymous character of their comment sections (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). Facebook, in contrast, is less anonymous, a space where users can find out about one another and a system for notifying users of others' likes and comments, altogether giving commenters greater accountability for their posts (Rowe, 2015).

Because of the growing popularity of leaving and reading comments online, these spaces for public discourse have become an important topic for communication research. Scholars have examined news comments to understand the impact of interactivity and other content features (Weber, 2014), the quality of news comments (Rowe, 2015), motivations for commenting (Stroud et al., 2016), personal characteristics of news commenters (Wu & Atkin, 2017), and the influence of news comments on users' evaluation of news articles and social issues (Prochazka et al., 2016) and their future commenting behaviors (Rösner & Krämer, 2016).

In an attempt to also contribute to this growing body of study, this article is interested to problematize the relationship between news and news comments. More specifically do news comments reflect the sentiments presented in the news content? And, can these comments be constituted as a form of public opinion? Ksiazek (2018) proposed that news comments could indicate user engagement with the news, as well as offer insight into how users are participating in virtual discussions of current events. The emergence of interactive digital platforms for the provision of news has sparked an interest in capturing the ways that users are engaging, experiencing, and reacting to content. When users choose to comment on a news story, they are signaling a heightened interest by not only processing and reacting to the news, but by choosing to share their thoughts in a public forum. Therefore, news comments offer the possibility to learn about the effectiveness of news stories in influencing user opinions. The comments users share after reading an article can suggest whether they agree, disagree or are not affected at all by the news. Aggregating the news stories and comparing it with the

overall comments can further acknowledge the level of influence news media have over the readers/public opinions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

News Comments Agenda Setting and Public Opinion

Agenda setting offers a way to understand this relationship between news and public opinion. Undeniably, the volume and theoretical richness of research activity on Agenda setting have made it one of the most studied concepts in media effect research (McCombs, 2005). The concept of agenda setting was innovated by Walter Lippmann (1922) in his famous book, "Public Opinion," where he posited the notion that the media construct public views of the world. Fifty years later, McCombs and Shaw conducted the seminal study of agenda setting. This study has been called one of the 15 milestones in mass communication research (Lowery & Defleur, 1995). The central thesis of a 'first-level' agenda setting is the transfer of object salience from the mass media to the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). It mainly focuses on the issues, events or political figures of the media agenda, and how the media agenda impacts audience perceptions about what issues are worthy of attention. Coleman, McCombs, Shaw and Weaver (2009), defined it as:

"the process of the mass media presenting certain issues frequently and prominently with the result that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as more important than others ... the more coverage an issue receives, the more important it is to people" (p. 147).

In other words, the amount of news coverage of an object would largely determine the perceived importance of that object by the audience. The level of importance or what McCombs (2004) referred to as salience indicate the transfer of influence from the media to the audience. To examine the effect of the media, agenda setting lists and compares the media's issue salience with the public's issue salience. The media's issue salience can be identified by studying the media news coverage while public's issue salience can be learned by asking the public about the issues that are important to them. Traditional methods of investigating whether news influences public agendas require comprehensive and sometimes complex field study wherein a public opinion survey becomes the prominent way to identify public sentiments. But with the availability of direct user comments on news, it

becomes possible to look at how media users respond to news articles and whether they place the same level of issue salience when compared with the issues covered by the news media. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to identify whether there exist a first-level agenda setting relationship between news media and the readers by comparing and analyzing the issues highlighted by online newspapers with the issues talked about by the news commenters during the Rantau by-election.

Facebook Usage in Malaysia

The rise of the online media and the continuous pressure for global openness has rapidly and steadily transformed both the media and political culture in Malaysia (Wok & Mohamed, 2017). Malaysians are actively challenging the conservative political culture by sharing their political opinions loud and clear online where government control is limited. In 2018, Malaysians overthrew a 61 year old government that had a powerful hold over the country's media and political apparatus. The Internet, especially SNS offered Malaysians the avenue to get alternative news and to discuss and contemplate over local politics. It would not be too far-fetched to claim that Facebook is where most of the political discourses took place (Salman, Yusoff, Salleh and Abdullah, 2018) (Lee, 2017)

Malaysians are generally Facebook savvy. With a population of 31.2 million, the country has some 16 million Facebook users (MCMC, 2017). The popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook was made possible by the improved Internet backbone, increase in Internet penetration and overall better utilization of Information Technologies in terms of mobile phones, computers and Internet access (Wok and Mohamed, 2017). Overall, Internet usage amongst individuals in Malaysia increased from 57 percent in 2013 to 71.1 percent in 2015, although the digital divide between rural and urban areas remains significant in states such as Sarawak, Sabah, Negeri Sembilan and Perak (Lee, 2017).

A 2016 study on the usage of social networking sites conducted by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) found that Malaysians access the Internet very frequently (86.6% at least once a day) and are very participative in social networking sites (84.3%), Primarily, Facebook. The study found that 96.5 percent of

Internet users surveyed owned at least a Facebook account and 53.8 percent of the Internet users accessed Facebook on a daily basis.

The survey by MCMC also found that some 18.3% percent of social media users share political views. While the percentage of social media users sharing political views may not be that high, it is still a significant source of information for those who access it (90.1%). 86.9% of those who were surveyed identified that social media was one of the main online sources of information for them. A study on political engagement among Malaysian voters by Salman et al. (2018) supports the centrality of SNS in Malaysian political discourse. The study found that 63.5% of voters identifies SNS as their main source for political information with 86.5% claiming Facebook as their main SNS platform.

All the major newspapers in Malaysia operate actively on Facebook. They do so mainly because it is legally and politically more conducive for them to engage with the readers on SNS where the government cannot assert its full control. The mainstream newspapers that have direct link to the old government do not have a comment section in their online news portal. This is to avoid negative and controversial user discussions. However, when extending their news stories on Facebook and allowing for user comments, these newspapers are able to technically defy the imposed self-censorship and allow readers to interact. Therefore the Facebook pages of Malaysian newspapers are definitely more alive and popular when compared to their online sites.

The Rantau By-Election

The political discourse that went on during the weeks going into the 14th General Election is a testament to the popularity of the Facebook pages of local newspapers. Every news article that relate to the election was responded with high volume of user shares and comments. In the comment sections, the users were unabashed and were very daring in sharing their opinions despite the still strict media environment. The sentiments shared by the users at the time were quite cohesive and presented an obvious public opinion. However, no careful study had captured the public opinion that was forming in the comment sections of the Facebook pages of the local newspapers at the time.

Interestingly, less than a year after the historic 14th General Election that saw a change in the federal government, Malaysia had experienced

6 by-elections. In addition to general elections, a by-election occurs when a particular seat in the lower house of the parliament becomes vacant when, a member of parliament (MP) dies or is disqualified from being a member of the parliament. In each of this election, the Facebook pages of the Malaysian newspapers were alive with continuous stream of news coverage and an overwhelming user comments. It is interesting to look at how the users are discussing about the election and how they identified with the issues around the elections. On April 13th, 2019, a by-election was held in Rantau, a state legislative seat in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. The by-election was called because the seat became vacant after the uncontested election of incumbent Mohamad Hasan of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), a component of Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition was declared null and void.

In the 2018 General election, Mohamad Hasan, the 3-term former Chief Minister of Negeri Sembilan won the seat uncontested after Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)'s candidate Dr Streram Sinnansamy was not allowed to enter the Nomination Centre to file his papers because he did not have a pass issued by the Election Commission (EC). However, the Election Court has on the 16th of November 2018, allowed the petition by Dr S. Streram and passed a ruling that Mohamad Hasan had not been duly elected. A fresh election was called to be held after Mohamad Hasan's appeal was dismissed by the Federal Court on the 18th of February 2019.

The nomination day was on the 30th of March, with a about 2-week campaigning period until Election Day. The constituency has 20,926 registered voters- 20,804 ordinary voters, 118 early voters and four absentee voters.

Just like in the previous local elections, the Rantau election garnered high attention because there was raising political tension in the aftermath of the GE 14. The current opposition parties seemed to have gathered a strong support and was challenging the popularity of the newly elected Pakatan Harapan government. In fact, the opposition coalition Barisan Nasional had won the two previous by elections in Cameron Highlands and Semenyih. Therefore by focusing on the news coverage on the Rantau by-election and relating it to the responding news comments, this article tests the 'first-level' agenda setting effects of online news by asking:

1. Do the issues presented by the Malaysian Newspapers parallel with the issues talked about by the news commenters on Facebook during the PRK Rantau's campaign weeks?
2. Do the comments section in newspapers' Facebook pages represent public opinion?

METHODOLOGY

For this election, the candidates were allowed to officially campaign from March 30th 2019 to April 12th 2019. This election rule is unique to Malaysia where it is illegal by law for politicians to campaign openly outside the allocated time. Therefore, this period of time was very suitable to observe the hype surrounding the election. It was in these two weeks that all the newspapers had daily updated coverage on the local election. The study also extended to a day after the election in order to capture how the news media and the news commenters responded towards the election results. As such, the study was conducted for duration of over two weeks starting from March 2nd, which was nomination day until midnight March 18th, the day after the election.

Four main newspapers with large Facebook followings were chosen for the study. They consists two Malay newspapers: Berita Harian and Sinar Harian and two English newspapers: Malaysiakini (English), and TheStar. These newspapers have prominent online presence and represented a slightly varied readership. Malaysiakini, both the Bahasa and English versions were mostly read by the more urban, educated and politically-liberal demographic group (Lee, Nayan and Othman, 2016). TheStar mostly attracted the urban, English-speaking and mostly non-Malay readers. Berita Harian and Sinar Harian both have large online followings which are staples for most low to middle-class Malay readers (Lee et al., 2016). These variations in the demographic and psychographic of the readers are important in capturing a more inclusive data that represented majority of Malaysians.

Table1: Descriptions of the sampled newspapers

	Number of Facebook Followers	Total number of all news stories	Total number of comments for all news stories
Malaysiakini (English Edition)	1.7 million	90	3850

Sinar Harian (Bahasa)	3.9 million	160	7642
Berita Harian	5.3 million	140	7200
TheStar (English)	1.08 million	65	2500
Total		450	21,192

Content analysis was used to collect the data. It is a common method used in electoral studies (Idid, 2017) especially when looking at news coverage during elections. Ahmad and Buyong (2017) content analysed the political issues covered by several online newspapers during the Malaysian 13th election. Similarly, Salman et al. (2017) explored the agenda setting functions of the English newspapers in that same election. Studies that focused on the use of Facebook during election have also relied on content analysis. Manaf, Taibi and Manan (2017) content analysed the issues presented on the Facebook pages of Malaysian newspapers and compared them with the public issues identified through a public opinion survey. On the other hand Zainuddin et al. (2017) content analysed both the Tamil newspapers and Facebook pages of Indian politicians in the attempt to look at the issues concerning the Indian voters during the 13th general election.

A standardized code book and code sheet was designed to record the data. The code book detailed all the variables included in the study while the code sheet was designed to capture the issues and slants shared by both the newspapers and their readers. Three coders were trained on the materials by the researchers. Each coder was assigned with a newspaper and was asked to code the 10 most popular news on the ‘PRK Rantau’ during the study period. Popular in this sense refers to the amount of response an article gathers in terms of the number of comments and shares. This lasted for 15 days. Therefore, each coder worked on 150 pieces of news. However, the English newspapers (Malaysiakini and TheStar) appeared to covered less on the election, thus a coder was assigned to look at both newspapers and was asked to code 75 pieces of news from each paper. Since the number of comments on each news article was very big, only the top 50 most relevant comments were coded. On Facebook, most relevant comments are comments that have the most replies. This meant that each coder needed to code 7, 500

comments (150 news stories x 50 comments) which totals up to 22,500 comments. However, some news articles had less than 50 comments. In these instances, the coders were asked to code all of the available comments. In sum, 21, 192 comments were analysed.

To gauge the agenda setting relationship between the newspapers and the readers, two main variables were studied. They were the issues reported by the newspapers and the issues discussed about by the readers. The issues discussed in all news articles were aggregated and ranked based on the total coverage. The same approach was used on the news comments. All of the issues discussed by the commenters were aggregated and ranked according to the number of times the issues were discussed. All data was recorded and analysed using IBM's statistical SPSS software.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Results from the content analysis conducted showed that there is a relationship between the issues highlighted by the newspapers with the issues talked about by the news commenters. However, this relationship is not as linear and as direct as proposed by the traditional agenda setting relationship. The study identified more than 20 main issues discussed by the newspapers and the news commenters during the campaign weeks. These issues included Politics, Election, Economy, Crimes, Development, Education, International Relations and many more. These main issues are generic and are an umbrella to a variety of related sub-issues. For example, issues such as corruption, human trafficking and counterfeits are categorized under Crimes. The table below describes the 10 most popular main issues discussed by both the newspapers and the commenters.

Table 2: Description of the ten most popular Issues

No	Main Issue	Description
1.	Politics	Issues relating to the political system, the strength and weaknesses of the political parties and the act of the politicians.
2.	Election	Issues about the electoral system and the election process such as the election dates, rules and logistics

3.	Economy	Issues relating to Malaysia's finances such as recession, inflation, poverty, tax, exchange rates and cost of living
4.	Campaign	Issues about the candidates' campaign activities such as manifestos and election speeches and promises
5.	Leadership	Issues relating to the leadership in the government and the political parties
6.	PH Admin	Issues relating to the effectiveness of Pakatan Harapan government's manifestos, policies and actions
7.	Development	Issues concerning the country's modern physical development that includes infrastructure, public transportation, highways, internet speed and many others
8.	BN Admin	Issues relating to the effectiveness of the previous Barisan Nasional government's manifestos, policies and actions
9.	Malay-Islam	Issues involving Malay privileges and Islam as the country's official religion
10.	Unity	Issues relating to the conflicts around racial integration between the different ethnic groups

However, in order to identify the issue salience, the results will only show the 7 most popular issues written about in the news to compare with the 7 most popular issues written about by the news commenters.

Issues Salience in the Newspapers

Table 3 lists the top 7 most popular issues written by each of the newspapers. Although the ranking of the issues differ among the newspapers, the differences were minor, as the newspapers tend to focus on the same issues.

Table 3: Top seven issues discussed in the newspapers

Issues	Malaysiakini (English)	Sinar Harian	Berita Harian	TheStar
--------	---------------------------	-----------------	------------------	---------

1. Politics	22 (18%)	86 (25%)	40 (19%)	12 (15%)
2. Leadership	37 (31%)	72 (21%)	31 (15%)	34 (42%)
3. Campaign	24 (20%)	95 (28%)	22 (10%)	8 (10%)
4. Election	16 (13%)	55 (16%)	81 (38%)	14 (17%)
5. PH Admin	11 (9%)	6 (2%)	26 (12%)	3 (4%)
6. Unity	4 (3%)	15 (5%)	2 (1%)	4 (5%)
7. Development	7 (6%)	11 (3%)	10 (5%)	6 (7%)
Total (n)	121 (100%)	340 (100%)	212 (100%)	81 (100%)

For example, all four newspapers wrote heavily on ‘Politics’ and the issue was more popular with the Malay newspapers. Sinar Harian wrote about ‘Politics’ 86 (25%) times while Berita Harian wrote about it 40 (19%) times. The most popular issue for the English newspapers was ‘Leadership’. Malaysiakini English wrote about ‘Leadership’ 37 (31%) times while TheStar wrote on it 34 (42%) times. The Malay newspaper focused less on ‘Leadership’ issues as it only made up 21% of the news in Sinar Harian and 15 % of the news in Berita Harian. News on ‘Campaign’ was also among the main issues covered by the newspapers. 28% of the news on Sinar Harian was focused on ‘Campaign’ and this made it the most salient issue for the newspaper. On the other hand, the most salient issue in Berita Harian is ‘Election; (38%). The other issues that were given attention by the newspapers were ‘Development’ and ‘PH administration’. The newspapers also wrote significantly about ‘Unity’. Racial integration and ethnic unity were significant components in the Rantau by election especially because of the racial makeup of the electorate that were almost evenly districted among the different racial groups. Unlike the previous by elections where the electorate were majority Malay-Muslims (Yusof, 2019), Rantau had a significant number of non-Malay voters. In Rantau, 55% of the voters are Malays, 26% are Indians and 18% are Chinese, while the remainder are made up of smaller minority groups (Macintyre, 2019). As such the candidates

and their respective political parties were careful when talking about the racial issues and instead chose to use the ‘unity’ narrative when campaigning.

Issues Salience among News Commenters

Table 4 lists the top 7 issues discussed by the news commenters. The news commenters appear to respond more to the news shared by the newspapers that mainly focused on ‘Politics’.

Table 4: Top 7 issues discussed by the news commenters

Issues	Malaysiakini (English)	Sinar Harian	Berita Harian	TheStar
1. Politics	81 (14%)	146 (21%)	119 (20%)	44 (14%)
2. Leadership	83 (15%)	159 (23%)	125 (21%)	59 (18%)
3. PH Admin	44 (8%)	111 (16%)	132 (22%)	27 (8%)
4. Election	21 (4%)	139 (20%)	117 (19%)	18 (6%)
5. BN Admin	24 (4%)	28 (4%)	46 (8%)	5 (1%)
6. Malay-Islam	19 (3%)	83 (12%)	46 (8%)	6 (2%)
7. Economy	11 (2%)	28 (4%)	13 (2%)	2 (1%)
TOTAL (n)	283 (100%)	694 (100%)	598 (100%)	161 (100%)

Just like in the newspapers, ‘Politics’ was the second and third most popular issue among the news commenters. There appears to be a direct transfer of issue salience when it comes to political issues. The most popular issue among all the news commenters was ‘Leadership’. Except for the news commenters in Berita Harian who ranked ‘Leadership’ as second most popular issue, all the commenters in Sinar Harian, Malaysiakini (English) and TheStar wrote significantly about ‘Leadership’. The commenters were mostly critical of the current leadership. They expressed concerns about the abilities of the current PH ministers as well as criticizing the credibility of the previous BN ministers. This indicated that there is a strong connection between the issues raised in the English newspapers and their readers as ‘Leadership’ was equally the most popular issue written about in the

English newspapers. The commenters also agreed with the newspapers on issues of Election and 'PH Administration'

There were three main issues that were heavily commented upon by newsreaders but were not highlighted as much by the newspapers. This is a unique find as it challenges the theoretical assumptions of Agenda setting that predicts a transfer of issue salience from the newspapers to its readers. In this instance, there is a considerable disagreement between what the newspapers promote as important issues with what the news commenters accepted and discussed about. Therefore there is a fracture in the role of newspapers as curators of public opinion. This meant that the newsreaders were writing about 'BN Administration' 'Malay-Islam' and 'Economy' when commenting on news pieces that were not specifically focused on the three issues. Hence, their opinion on these issues do not necessarily relate with what news they read. It is interesting to know, although not too surprising that the 'Malay Islam' issues is more prominent among commenters in Malay newspapers compared to the English papers. It was made up of 12% and 8% of the most popular issues discussed by the Commenters in Sinar Harian and Berita Harian respectively. On the other hand, the 'Malay Islam' issues only made up 3% of the comments made by the readers of Malaysiakini (English) and 2% of comments made by the readers of TheStar. This means that there is a significant division among the newsreaders when it comes to the 'Malay-Islam' issue. Does this mean that the readers of the Malay newspapers who represented the general Malay bottom and middle classes perceive threats to their privileged positions? Another interesting finding, was the significance of 'BN Administration' to the commenters. While, the commenters did echo the newspapers interest in the PH Administration, it appeared that the readers were also interested to talk about the Administration of the previous BN government.

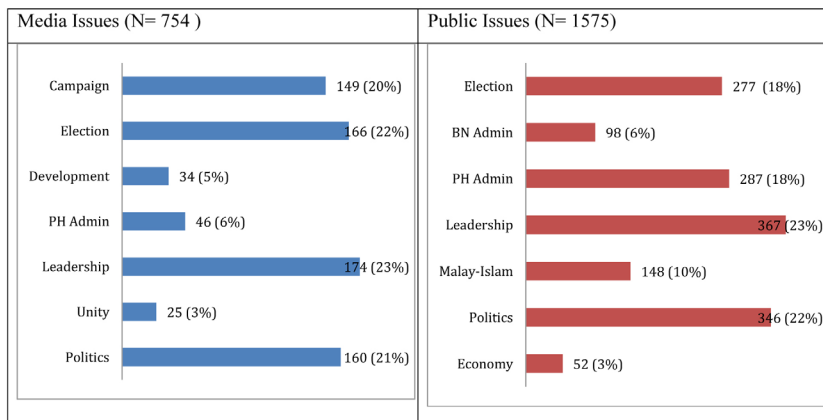
Barisan Nasional was still emphasized by the readers in their comments. It was topic discussed by the readers of all the newspapers: Berita Harian (8%), Malaysiakini English (4%), TheStar (1%) and Sinar Harian (11%). Although, the comments were both appreciative and depreciative of the failed political coalition, it was apparent that it was still relevant to Malaysians in general. More specifically, the commenters acknowledged the contribution the BN government had brought to Rantau. Especially, under the leadership of the candidate,

Dato’ Mohd Hassan who had served as the Negeri Sembilan Chief Minister for 14 years prior to GE 14 and the fall of the BN government.

Issue Salience in the Newspaper and In the Comment Sections

To identify whether the issues presented by the newspapers parallel the issues written about by the news commenters, the total numbers of issues were aggregated and compared. In broad, both the newspapers and the commenters focused on a list of similar issues. Both focused on issues such as ‘Politics’, ‘Leadership’, ‘PH Administration’ and ‘Election’. However, there were also issues that were not shared by both parties. For example, the newspapers placed importance on issues such as ‘Development’ and ‘Unity’ while the commenters did not find these issues as significant. Instead, the commenters were more interested on issues concerning ‘Economy’, ‘BN Administration’ and ‘Malay-Islam’. The graph below compares the issues salienc between the newspapers and the news commenters.

Figure 1: Issue Salienc in the newspaper and in the comment sections



The most popular issues for both the newspapers and the commenters were ‘Leadership’ ‘Politics’ and ‘Election’. There was an exact match whereby 23% of the issues focused on by both the newspapers and the commenters were on ‘Leadership’. There was also an almost exact sentiment among the newspapers (21%) and the commenters (22%) on issues of ‘Politics’. Political issues are popular mainly due to the

complex and sometimes instable political climate that had evolved in Malaysia post GE-14. Since it was the first time Malaysia had ever experienced a government change, all those involved including the politicians, the government and the people were still adjusting to the new political status quo. The new PH government is still learning on how to administer a country while coordinating within its own loosely tied component parties that have different ideals and work ethics. The Barisan Nasional on the other hand, is still reeling over its loss and trying to salvage whatever political influence it still has. In the aftermath of its loss in GE14, BN was faced with internal conflicts in which some of its coalition parties and members have chosen to leave and even join the PH government. At the same time, several of its top leaders are currently facing legal charges for many different reasons. To ensure its survival, Barisan Nasional or UMNO especially has moved towards building a strong relationship with PAS. PAS is the Islamist party that has significant support among the Malays. An UMNO-PAS partnership can mobilize the support of the majority Malay voters. These constant and rapid political changes affected the public who are also trying to come to terms with the new political climate. PH's inability to show that they are an effective government and BN's slow recovery is making the public nervous about the country's future.

The newspaper captured these political activities extensively during the campaign weeks. Among the prominent political issue that arose during the Rantau election was the lack of support PKR, the party representing the Pakatan Harapan government in the election; was getting from its counterparts from the coalition resulting in the newspapers and the public to speculate that there is a crisis and lack of agreement among the parties in the PH coalition. Another minor issue that garnered major attention was the candidacy of Mohd Nor Yasin, who initially claimed that he was running under Parti Islam-SeMalaysia (PAS), which was an ally to the Barisan Nasional. It created a controversy as PAS had denied that it was running in the election and had promised to give its full support to Barisan Nasional. It then turned out that Mohd Nor was no longer a PAS member but was instead a member of AMANAH, a member of the PH coalition. Running under AMANAH would not be feasible as it is accepted that PH will run in elections as a united coalition. The newspapers and commenters were equally interested in these political issues and responded to them as well referring to them

when commenting on other issues. Therefore it appears that stories with dramaturgical values appeal most to the newspapers and its readers.

Although 'Leadership' was the most popular issue, it was also the only main issue that shared the same level of importance among the newspapers and its readers. The ranking of issues differed from the second to the seventh places. For the newspapers, significant attention was given to issues of 'Election' (22%) and 'Campaign' (20%). This is probably due to the fact that the newspapers were reporting on the statements and announcements made by the Election Commission and also covering all the candidates' campaign activities. This included the live updates on nomination day and polling day. Despite the extensive news coverage on these issues, the commenters did not find them to be appealing. 'Campaign' did not even make it into the commenters' top 7 most popular issue.

'PH Administration' was more popular with the news commenters (18%) than the newspapers (6%). The newspapers were reporting significantly on the Pakatan Harapan, primarily focusing on the government's plans and activities. Meanwhile, the commenters were expressing their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the government's current performance. Another interesting finding is the significance put by the commenters on issues relating to 'Malay-Islam'. Although the news coverage on the topic was scarce, the commenters kept referring to it even when discussing about other news stories. The 'Malay-Islam' issue became prominent among the commenters mostly due to it being used by UMNO-PAS when explaining their political partnership that had gone stronger post GE-14. UMNO-PAS had used the Malay-Islam narrative to gain support from the Malays. The two largest Malay parties used to be traditional foes but have recently been coordinating as a united opposition front. Among the issues played on by these parties were the threats brought by Pakatan Harapan's supposed liberal stance against the Malay privilege and the role of Islam as the official religion.

Another issue that was very significant to the commenters but not to the newspapers was the 'Economy' (3%). The commenters were especially concerned about the continued rise in cost of living. They were also apprehensive about Pakatan Harapan's strict handling of the economy where many projects proposed by the previous government had been cancelled and postponed. The PH's government's inability

to fulfill their GE14 manifestos in which they promised to reduce the people's financial burden by demolishing student loans, highway tolls and cutting down fuel price were among the points often made by the commenters. In short, the commenters were not happy about the country's current economic state.

'BN Administration' was more popular among the commenters than with the newspapers. It did not make it into the seven most popular issues in the newspapers but was number six among the issues talked about by the commenters (6%). This showed that the commenters were still comparing the PH government with the previous BN government. While the comments were not entirely positive, it does indicate that the Barisan Nasional is very much still relevant to the commenters. This could be attributed to the Barisan Nasional's strong victories in the previous by elections in Semeniyih and Cameron Highland as well as it's united show where its components UMNO (United Malay National Organization), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) were seen to be campaigning together where else, Pakatan Harapan coalition parties did not appear to support one another.

Overall, it appears that while the newspapers did focus on issues that were more focused on the Rantau voters such as 'Campaign' and 'Development', it is still the broader national-based issues such as politics, economy and Leadership that were more important for the newspapers to write about and more significant to the commenters to talk about. Therefore, in the attempt to look at public sentiments in social media it would be essential to acknowledge that online commenters are not the locals that will be casting the vote. Therefore, they may not be able to offer a strong indication of voting behavior as a locally focused survey would. However, it is also crucial to consider that while these commenters may not be directly voting in the election, they are contributing to the political climate by asserting importance on issues that may not be significantly covered by the media.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study showed that during the Rantau election, the Malaysian newspapers and their readers were focusing on similar issues but were not giving the same amount of significance to the issues. As such, the issue salience between the newspapers and the readers did

not exactly match. Issues such as ‘Malay Islam’, ‘Economy’ and ‘BN Administration’ were not significantly covered by the newspaper but were extensively discussed about by the commenters. This proposed that the commenters were not directly influenced by the news they have read. This brings into question the roles of news organizations that are often acknowledged as social institutions ‘that produce and communicate statements about reality on a regular basis’ (Ekström, 2002: 274). As agenda setters, news media provides the public with the information that helps the public understand the opinion climate around them (Hoffman, 2012).

However, the commenters in this study showed that their opinions on issues are not necessarily dictated by the news they read. This could be due to the nature of the comments section itself. In it, the commenters as well as the silent readers are exposed to other opinions and expressions about the same news stories. Just like in a ‘marketplace of ideas’, these commenters are not just informed and influenced by the news content but also by the ideas brought upon by other commenters. As such, even a straightforward news piece could trigger discussions about many different things. Two main propositions can be derived from this. That is, first, the commenters are probably more affected by the issues brought by the other commenters, making the role of the news media less of agenda setters but more of a ‘discourse centers’. Second, while this may undermine the role of news media as agenda setters, it increases the significance of the comment sections as areas where public opinions are formed and can be observed.

When assessing the role of the ‘other’ commenters, the ideas of opinion leaders, third-person effects and even the spiral of silence are relevant frameworks that can help explain how media influence have become less direct and is at often times, mediated by others’ opinions. In this case of the user comments in news sites or Facebook, both the authoritative journalistic outlets and the opinions of ‘ordinary people’ appear on the same web page. If a news article on a certain issue is followed by contradicting user comments, it would not only affect the news readers but also the public opinion climate. Thus, while the news media is still an important source of news and distributors of agendas, its role as a powerful agenda setters may be in question. It is not that the media no longer sets the agenda, as this study suggests the issues brought up by the media are still almost similar to the issues discussed

by the commenters. Yet, the ways in which the news commenters are able to relate these issues to other problems, agreeing and disagreeing with one another or even proposing a different and unrelated ideas altogether suggest that while the news media may not be directly setting the public agendas, they are significant discourse centers where issues are discussed and contemplated upon before they are accepted as a salient agenda. Thus, the proposition that news media are agenda setters is still very much relevant but this relationship has evolved into a more dynamic interaction between the news, the readers and the commenters. Therefore, to remain as an important source of news and agendas, news media must be able to strategically coordinate its role as agenda setters and discourse centers.

As discourse centers, news sites are now significant sites to learning about current public opinion. The number of comments supporting or opposing certain issues can become a direct cue in indicating the public's attitudes and trends (albeit bias to the demographics of the news readers). Facebook has integrated the technical capability of expressing emotions and sentiments supporting or objecting to the news article or user comment. The number of likes or dislikes a comment receives might strengthen readers' perceptions on the popularity and importance of certain issues. While there is the threat of how populist and radical views will drown democratic opinions, optimists such as Soffer (2017) argued that the larger the number of comments, the higher is the ability of public discourse in balancing out bias and populist views.

In conclusion, the public engagements and discussions that occur in the news site's Facebook comment sections are indications of public opinion. These comments go beyond public expression as it has the potential to also influence the agenda setting process. Therefore, news media must now acknowledge the significance of news commenters not merely as readers but also opinion leaders that mediate the transfer of issues. Similarly, scholarly research needs to recognize the nature of online opinions especially in regards to how they form and effect the public sentiments. Hence, the need for more sophisticated methods that can help strategically learn about how ideas and opinions transfer through networks.

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