Exploring the agenda-setting potential of homeland online newspapers on perceptions of elections issues among diasporic Nigerians in Malaysia

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Abstract: The increasing transnational migration of people and availability of homeland newspapers on the web have stimulated interest in the understanding of the use and effects of homeland media on a nation's foreign residents. This study explores the relationship between the agenda covered in three Nigerian online newspapers (N=260) and how they were perceived by Nigerian students in Malaysia (N=350) during the 2011 Nigerian presidential election. Specifically, the issues in online newspapers and their location (homepage and index) and length were compared with the issues perceived as being important by Nigerian students in Malaysia. Comparing content analysis data with survey responses, the findings revealed a modest but plausible support for the agenda-setting potential of the online newspapers. In view of the established correspondence between issues that are salient in the news and issues perceived by the readers, the study establishes the importance of homeland online media to political cognitions and actions among diasporic Nigerians. It also suggests the need to explore other cues in the online newspapers capable of raising the salience of issues in the perceptions of the Nigerian diaspora.

Keywords: 2011 Nigerian presidential election; agenda-setting; issues salience; Nigerian students in Malaysia; online newspapers.

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Abstrak: Dengan bertambahnya penghijrahan dari satu negara ke negara yang lain beserta dengan terdapatnya surat khabar tanah air di dalam laman sosial telah merangsang minat terhadap kefahaman tentang penggunaan dan kesan media tanah air terhadap penghijrah antarabangsa. Kajian ini meninjau pertalian antara agenda yang diliputi dalam tiga naskah surat khabar Nigeria atas talian (N=260) dan bagaimana mereka ditafsir oleh pelajar-pelajarnya di Malaysia (N=350) semasa pilihanraya presiden. Khususnya, isu dalam surat khabar atas talian dan lokasi (laman utama dan indeks) serta kepanjangannya telah dibandingkan dengan isu-isu yang dirasai penting oleh pelajar-pelajar Nigeria di Malaysia. Dengan membandingkan data analisis isi kandungan dengan jawapan-jawapan daripada tinjauan, hasil kajian menunjukkan tahap penerimaan yang sederhana tetapi dapat memberi sokongan kepada potensi pembentukan agenda dalam surat khabar atas talian. Daripada pandangan yang terbentuk antara isu yang penting dalam berita dengan isu yang difikirkan pembaca, kajian ini mendapati bahawa media tanah air dapat membentuk pemikiran politik serta tindakan dalam kalangan pelajar-pelajar Nigeria. Kajian ini juga turut mencadangkan bahawa surat khabar atas talian mampu meningkatkan tanggapan pelajar-pelajar Nigeria di Malaysia mengenai isu-isu penting di tanah air mereka.

Kata Kunci: Pilihanraya Presiden Nigeria 2011; perbentukan agenda; isu-isu penting yang menonjol; pelajar-pelajar Nigeria di Malaysia; surat khabar atas talian.

In the last four decades, agenda-setting theory has remained a heuristic theoretical paradigm for understanding the influence of media content on perceptions of the real world. The influence of the mass media on public opinion was inherent in Lippmann's treatise in *Public Opinion* and Cohen's epigram in *The Press and Foreign Policy.* Lippmann (1922) argued that people are hardly influenced by their external environment as much as they are influenced by the pictures in their heads - the pictures painted by the reporters, broadcasters, editors, producers, and other members of the Fourth Estate of the Realm. Advancing Lippmann's viewpoint, Cohen (1963, p. 13) posited that "the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion…It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." These higher order concepts were fruitfully empiricised by McCombs and Shaw (1972) during the 1968 U.S. presidential election, thus opening a floodgate of research in the annals of mass communication scholarship (Mustapha, 2012).

Since its formal emergence, agenda-setting theory has been hailed and vilified. The theory, however, has stood its ground by withstanding the falsification of its assumptions. Agenda-setting is a true and tested theory (Sparks, 2006; Tai, 2009). It has also demonstrated a compatibility with a number of other conceptual and theoretical paradigms in mass communication (McCombs, 2004; 2005; McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escober & Rey, 1997). By orienting members of the public to important social agenda, scholars have credited the media with the ability to raise salience of issues in the public perceptions (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). According to Dearing and Rogers (1996, p. 8), "salience is the degree to which an issue on the agenda is perceived as relatively important." Citing Ansolabehere and Iyengar, Pietryka (2012) suggests that salience entails important issues at the heart of media and public attention. The ability of the media to raise the salience of issues in public attention via application of attention grabbing cues (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) is central to the public's learning from and orientation to mediated external environment, which is the main focus of agenda-setting theory (McCombs, 2004).

Besides its heuristic value spanning areas such as politics, health, environment and corporate communications, among others (Coleman, McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2009; Dearing & Rogers, 1996), agenda-setting has equally been found fruitful in many locales across the world (McCombs, 2004; 2005; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007). The theory has been empiricized using a unique medium of mass communication or a combination of a multitude of media platforms (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007).

Medium contingency has been identified as an important moderator in agenda-setting research since the days of traditional media (Miller, 2005). The arrival of the new media has raised fundamental questions on the potency of agenda-setting as it was hitherto known (Althaus & Tewskbury, 2002; Maier, 2010; Schonbach, de Waal & Lauf, 2005). Debate has ensued as to the possibility or otherwise of the new media to transfer issues (and attributes) salience from the media agenda into the public agenda. Althaus and Tewksbury (2002), for instance, found the traditional newspaper more efficacious than the online newspapers in their study of differential agenda-setting effects of print and online versions of *The New York Times*. In contrast, other scholars have

reported tremendous agenda-setting potential of the online news media (Coleman & McCombs, 2007; Jeon, 2004; Maier, 2010; Roberts, Wanta & Dzwo, 2002; Yu, 2005).

Most studies on the agenda-setting effects of the online media were, however, conducted in locales where members of the public were exposed to a plethora of media platforms and other environmental contingencies. Limited studies considered captive audience of the online news media by virtue of their temporospatial dislocation from their homelands. This study, therefore, fills the gap in the literature by examining the agenda-setting influence of Nigerian online newspapers on the perceptions of foreign residents of the key issues in the 2011 Nigerian presidential election. Being first of its kind, this study examines the complexity of media effects that are possible with increasing migration of citizens and globalization of local news.

The choice of the 2011 presidential election was informed by the view that the election time serves as a period of political social learning and increased need for orientation (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The increasing agitation of foreign resident Nigerians to gain direct participation rights in Nigerian political moments, through absentee or postal voting, which requires being abreast with Nigerian homeland political developments, raises the importance of the online newspapers among these citizens. Hence, we explore the relationship between the salience of prominent issues promoted in the election news coverage and perceived issue agenda of Nigerian students in Malaysia.

Literature review

The seminal work of McCombs and Shaw (1972) on the ability of the media to set agenda of important issues for the public has yielded tremendous empirical evidence that public opinion fluctuates in relation to the media emphasis on certain events and issues. These scholars hypothesised that "the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues" (1972: 177). Following a matching of the media content and responses from Chapel Hill's voters during the 1968 US presidential election, McCombs and Shaw found a near perfect convergence in the agenda of key issues and concluded that the media succeeded in, "matching their messages to audience interests." (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 185). This paradigm-changing conclusion returned the field of

mass communication research to its earlier beginning before the law of minimal consequences held sway (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Spark, 2006).

To bolster the findings at Chapel Hill, using a larger sample and a more sophisticated design, Shaw and McCombs (1977) conducted another study to establish the causality of media influence on the public agenda. Charlotte's study, as the research was known, provided additional evidence for the causal influence of the media agenda on the public agenda. Other scholars advanced evidence in support of agenda-setting through different forms of designs (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981; Winter & Eyal, 1981). All these have led to continual exploration of the assumptions of agenda-setting and attendant generation of new areas of research with increasing conceptual, theoretical, and methodological dividends.

A meta-analytical study of agenda-setting found significant agenda-setting effects irrespective of methodologies (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). In a panoramic review of the research in agenda-setting, Dearing and Rogers (1996) submit that agenda-setting theory has contributed to empirical understanding of the effects of mass media. McCombs (2004) also documents the success of the theory in his inventory of agenda-setting. He advanced the five stages of the theory and concluded that each of the five stages is an independent research endeavour. Hence, agenda-setting has moved from its initial focus on issues (first-level of agenda-setting) to embrace salience of issue attributes (second-level of agenda-setting). Other key areas identified are psychological contingency, inter-media agenda setting, and the consequences of agenda-setting (Coleman, McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 2009; McCombs, 2004, 2005).

Online newspapers and migrant audience

According to Hiller and Franz (2004), migrants are people who are geographically and culturally distanced from their original roots. Folarin (2010) also conceptualises migrants as those who have stayed outside their country of origin for a period of six month and beyond. In contemporary times, migrants, however, are still connected with their homeland via online versions of local newspapers (Skogerbo & Winsvold, 2011). According to Hashim, Hasan, and Sinnapan (2007), online newspapers provide foreign residents with opportunities to monitor both global happenings and local events in their homelands.

Alshehri and Gunter (2002) support this view by arguing that online newspapers are central to the appropriation of socio-political and economic conditions of migrants' homeland.

By their exposure to daily events in their homeland, migrants experience a sense of co-presence, which eases their adaptation and provides the social glue binding them to their place of birth (Panagakos & Horst, 2006). Local newspapers have been credited with the power of building community and serving as public sphere where the public connect with their representatives (Mersey, 2010; Skogerbo & Winsvold, 2011). The opportunity for readers' comments offered by online newspapers could afford diasporic audience the chance of participating directly in their homelands' socio-political affairs.

In a study examining how foreign residents use the Internet to build ties with their places of origin, Hiller and Franz (2004) report that respondents claimed they read homeland newspapers every day on the Internet to stay in touch with happenings in their communities of birth and fight homesickness. The increasing migration of people and availability of communication media to help them stay connected with various interest groups wherever they are have thus called for examination and documentation of media use of nations' foreign residents (Hiller & Franz, 2004; Panagakos & Horst, 2006).

Being one of the countries experiencing increasing migration of her citizens, particularly from Africa (Kaba, 2004; Kent, 2007), the use of online newspapers among Nigerian foreign residents contributes to the ongoing efforts in transnational media studies. The availability of numerous Nigerian newspapers on the Web (KAS Democracy Report, 2008; Kperogi, 2008) and existence of millions of Nigerians in foreign lands relying on the online newspapers to follow Nigeria political development are, therefore, manifestations of the importance of online newspapers among foreign residents. The importance of online newspapers becomes more apparent during elections time where they have been found to contribute to citizens' awareness like their print counterparts (Jeon, 2004; Roberts, Wanta & Dzwo, 2002).

Online newspapers and elections

New technologies with its online media offspring such as online newspapers are pervasive in today's politics and government (Golde

& Nie, 2010; Towner & Dulio, 2008). For linking citizens with the political public sphere and devoting substantial space and time to political campaign, the mass media are generally regarded as central to election and democracy (de Waal & Schoenbach, 2008; Towner & Dulio, 2008). Online newspapers, therefore, are no exception to the rule. The centrality of online newspapers to contemporary news consumption has increased their political communication potentials (Rosenbery, 2005).

In a study comparing election coverage between traditional and online media, Mensing (2004) found that online newspapers surpassed other news media in terms of number of stories and amount of words published. While examining online media use for the 2008 presidential election in the United States, Towner and Dulio (2008, p. 6) found that the, "average respondent indicates getting presidential information from online newspapers 3.8 days per week." They also reported that "general political knowledge and specific campaign knowledge are positive and significantly related to Internet usage when controlling for partisan identification, age, education, income, gender, and race." For example, they found a positive relationship between online newspaper usage and general political knowledge (β= .48, p< .05) and specific knowledge about the presidential campaign (β= .25, p< .05). However, there are contentions on the ability of online newspapers to serve as useful media for political learning (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Coleman & McCombs, 2007; Maier, 2010; Mensing, 2004; Scharkow & Vogelgesang, 2009; Schoenbach, de Waal, & Lauf, 2005).

Essentially, the contention has been based on the characteristics of online newspapers that allow fragmentation of news on the one hand and autonomous consumption on the other hand (de Waal & Schoenbach, 2008; McCombs, 2005). However, other factors such as personal news utility (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2005), motives for media use (Picone, 2007), interest in political affairs (Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2009), as well as audience disposition and content characteristics (Scharkow & Vogelgesang, 2009) have been found essential in unpacking audience's learning from online newspapers. Giving their pervasiveness and continuing contentions on their uses and effects, scholars have called for application of traditional mass communication theories to the new media artefacts (Lim, 2006; Mensing, 2004; Scharkow & Vogelgesang, 2009).

Application of communication theory to online news platforms, particularly online newspapers, has, therefore, blossomed. In a study testing Uses and Gratifications Theory on online news media, Lin, Salwen and Abdullah (2005) identified four factors in online news use: entertainment, interpersonal networking, information scanning, and information skimming. These uses correspond to major media functions of surveillance, correlations, transmission, and entertainment earlier identified by Lasswell and Wright (McQuail, 2005). Exposure to and learning from Web media sources have also been documented (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2009). These studies argued that online newspapers serve similar functions as print versions.

By replicating and reflecting the culture of print newspapers (Boczkowski, 2004; Ihlstrom & Akesson, 2004), online newspapers offer political education and information. Their use for news and information has increased among adults (Abdullah et al., 2002), particularly the highly educated and affluent groups. The ability of online newspapers to present opinions that can structure political cognitions of the public has also led to a number of agenda-setting researches, particularly within the election contexts (Jeon, 2004; Mensing, 2004; Roberts, Wanta & Dzwo, 2002; Scharkow & Vogelgesang, 2009; Schonbach, de Waal & Lauf, 2005; Towner & Dulio, 2008).

Online newspapers and agenda-setting

Given different perspectives from which the online newspapers have been examined, their ability or otherwise to set the public agenda is far from conclusive. In one of the earliest examinations of the agenda-setting effects of the online newspapers, Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) argued that readers of the print version of *The New York Times* learned and recalled more issues than their counterparts who read the online version. These scholars argued that the limited attention grabbing cues inherent in online newspapers, such as non-linear presentation, and audience autonomy to personalise news consumption limit the online newspapers in shaping audience perceptions.

Similarly, Mensing (2004) avers that changes in news production and distribution have consequence for media agenda. Studying how traditional and new media presented the 2000 and 2004 presidential

primaries in the United State, she cautions that the medium changes the message and consequently affects what the audiences become aware of, learn from, and act on. Lending credence to the above view, de Waal, and Schoenbach (2008) asserted that inadequate optimization of digital potential, the absence of 'paging through,' non-linearity of news presentation, and limited attention-stimulating cues make print newspapers less able to orient the audience to societal issues than their online counterparts.

Besides direct comparison of online and print version of newspapers, other techniques have been used to test the relationship between online newspapers' coverage of issues and salience of such issues in the public agenda. Interestingly, most of these studies support the notion that online newspapers are capable of setting agenda for the audience's appreciation of important societal issues.

Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo (2002), for example, used frequency of Electronic Bulletin Board (EBB) discussion of issues as a surrogate for public agenda in 1996 U. S. presidential election. They found that three out of the four issues appearing in American online discussions correlated with media coverage of the issues by *The New York Times*, *Associated Press, Reuters, Time Magazine* and *CNN*. They went further to say that the online version of *The New York Times* showed the greatest agenda-setting influence.

In a study of effects of online newspapers on perceptions of issues in South Korean 2002 presidential election, Jeon (2004) extended the findings of Roberts and her colleagues by analysing readers' reactions to online newspapers articles through comments posted on the bulletin board of each paper. He found that more salient issues in the online newspapers, defined by prominence, length, multimedia, and the number of hyperlinks received more comments than the less salient ones. He thus concluded that there were significant correlations between issues that were salient in online newspapers and the audience perceptions of such issues.

Mensing (2004) compared issues presentation in printed and online newspapers in the 2000 and 2004 U. S. presidential election. She found that online news sites featured the election more than the print newspapers. In a representative survey of almost 1000 respondents, Schonbach, de Waal & Lauf (2005) found that both print and online

newspapers contribute to widening the audience agenda. Scharkow and Vogelgesang (2009) also compared and found a significant positive relationship between aggregate data from queries on Google search engine and salience of issues among 500 respondents in the 2005 German general election.

Online media agenda-setting studies depart from the traditional method of measuring the public agenda through survey or opinion poll. Although the use of readers' comments (Jeon, 2004; Roberts, Wanta & Dzwo, 2002) may provide support for the assumptions of agenda-setting theory, Delwiche (2005) cautioned that overreliance on digital data alone leads to temptation of structuralism. Citing Carey (1989), Delwiche asserts further that the use of only digital data limit communication to mere linear transmission, thus pummelling human agency in meaning construction.

Hypotheses

This study tested three hypotheses examining whether agenda of the election issues in the online newspapers corresponded to the agenda of issues perceived by the Nigerian students in Malaysia. To this effect, online newspapers' coverage of the main issues in the 2011 Nigerian presidential election was compared with the results of a survey conducted on Nigerian students in Malaysian institutions of higher learning during the election period. Similar to the Gallup poll's question commonly used in agenda-setting research, the survey, among others, asked about the issues that Nigerian students perceived as important problems for Nigeria. Hence, we examine whether the agenda of the issues in the online newspapers corresponds with the agenda of issues perceived by Nigerian students in Malaysia:

> H1: Overall agenda of issues in the online newspapers corresponds to the agenda of issues perceived by Nigerian students in Malaysia.

> H2: Agenda of issues reported in the homepage of the online newspaper corresponds to the agenda of issues perceived by the Nigerian students in Malaysia.

> H3: Agenda of issues in the long news stories corresponds to the agenda of issues perceived by Nigerian students in Malaysia.

While the first hypothesis examined the basic assumption of the agenda-setting theory, the other two sought to see the influence of news salience factors in the media transference of agenda into the public agenda. Kiousis (2004) identifies visibility and valence as two dimensions of salience. He says that attention given to certain issues in terms of news positioning and length influences the salience of the issues. In online newspapers, the homepage and the length of the news have been considered as salience factors (Jeon, 2004; Yu, 2005).

Methods

To establish the relationship between the agenda of issues in the online newspapers and agenda of issues in the perceptions of Nigerian students in Malaysia, a content analysis of three major Nigerian online newspapers was combined with the results of the survey of Nigerian students in Malaysian institutions of higher learning within the Klang Valley area. The online newspapers used in this study are the *Daily Trust*, *Punch*, and *Vanguard*. These papers are in the top ten in the hierarchy of more than fifty Nigerian daily newspapers (onlinenewspapers.com, 2015). A random check of the online newspapers read mostly by Nigerian students in Malaysia ranked the three online newspapers higher. Major newspapers have been identified as key suppliers of information that is capable of setting both the public agenda and the agenda of the small media outlets.

The unit of analysis for the content analysis was the news story. Two hundred and sixty news stories dealing with the 2011 Nigerian presidential election were downloaded, cut, and pasted into a word document between February 1 and March 31, 2011. This is to provide the appropriate time lag required for the issue to move from the media agenda into the public agenda. McCombs (2004) suggested that four weeks are enough time lag in agenda-setting effects. To examine the salience of the issues, each of the news stories was coded for eight main issues that were found to be recurring in the election coverage. The issues are: corruption, credible election, economy, infrastructure, power supply, security, social welfare, unemployment, and poverty alleviation. In the agenda-setting tradition, the salience of these issues in the online newspapers will also increase their salience in the audience perceptions.

One of the researchers together with a doctoral student in the Department of Political Science, International Islamic University

Malaysia, performed the coding. Forty news articles, representing 15.38% of the total news stories, were coded to establish the inter-coder reliability. The reliability estimates, using Cohen Kappa coefficient, ranged between 0.83 and 0.92. These coefficients were as follows: news story location 0.92; news story length 0.92, and main issue in the news 0.83.

Nigerian students in diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in four public universities and eight privately-owned universities within the Klang Valley form the respondents in this study. To abstract the public agenda of issues from Nigerian students in Malaysia, a survey questionnaire was distributed to 350 respondents from April 1 to April 17, 2011. However, only 308 were adequate for analysis. Besides asking questions on key demographic variables of the respondents, the questionnaire solicited the respondents to identify the most important problems facing Nigeria based on the issues identified in the online newspapers. These data allowed us to correlate key issues in the respondents' perceptions with the key issues reported in the online newspapers.

Consistent with the tradition in agenda-setting research, two data sets were generated in this study. These are data from the content analysis of the online newspapers and data from the survey of Nigerian students in Malaysia. Besides presenting the descriptive patterns in the data, the two data sets were compared using chi-square tests to establish the correspondence between the salience of each issue in the online newspapers and perceptions of the respondents.

In addition to the salience of individual issues, comparisons of the agenda of the issues between online newspapers and respondents' perceptions were conducted using Spearman's Rho correlation tests. The results of the correlation tests were thus used to affirm/refute the hypotheses advanced in this study. While correlations found in this study were not enough to affirm causality, they are pointers to the possibility of a relationship which further studies can build upon (Golan & Wanta, 2001; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Findings

The results of correspondence between the issues in the online newspapers and respondents' perceptions are presented in this section.

These include correspondence between the overall issues in the online newspapers and respondents' perceptions; correspondence between the issues in the news story location and respondents' perceptions, correspondence between issues in the news story length and respondents' perceptions, and test of hypotheses.

Table 1: Correspondence between the overall issues in the online newspapers and respondents' perceptions

Issues	Online Newspapers		Respondents' Perceptions		Chi-square	
	%	**Rank**	**%**	**Rank**	χ^2	**p**
Corruption	11.9	4	21.8	2	28.52	.000
Credible election	17.7	2	10.7	4	10.32	.001
Economy	**13.5**	**3**	**9.7**	**5**	**3.73**	**.053**
Infrastructure	10.0	6	3.9	8	12.75	.000
Power supply	11.2	5	26.0	1	67.60	.000
Security	20.4	1	12.0	3	13.34	.000
Social welfare	**7.3**	**8**	**8.4**	**6**	**0.59**	**.441**
Unemployment and poverty alleviation	**8.1**	**7**	**7.5**	**7**	**0.17**	**.684**
Total	**100.0**		**100.0**			
N	**260**		**308**			

Table 1 presents the emphasis on issues in the online newspapers coverage and salience of the issues in the perceptions of the respondents. Three topmost issues covered in the online newspapers were security, credible election, and economy. However, Nigerian students in Malaysia perceived power supply, corruption, and security as the most important problems facing Nigeria. This showed that only security appeared in the top hierarchy of the important issues covered in the online newspapers and respondents' perceptions. The only issue that tallied in rank in the online newspapers and respondents' perception is unemployment and poverty alleviation. The results also revealed that economy, social welfare, and unemployment and poverty alleviation shared equal salience in the online newspapers and respondents' perceptions.

The ranking of issues in the news story location, consisting of the index and the homepage, differ (Table 2). News story location is an important attention grabbing cue in the online newspapers, with the homepage holding a more potent agenda-setting power than the index

portion. In the index, credible election, security, and infrastructure were the three most salient issues. Of these issues, only security ranked high in the respondents' agenda of issues. The results did not reflect any tally in the agenda of the issues in the index portion of the online newspapers and the agenda of issues perceived by Nigerian students in Malaysia. The chi-square tests showed that there is no difference between the salience of economy, social welfare, as well as unemployment and poverty alleviation in the online newspapers and respondents' perceptions.

Table 2: Correspondence between the issues in the news story location and respondents' perceptions

Issues in News Story Location	Online Newspapers		Respondents' Perceptions		Chi-square	
	%	Rank	%	Rank	χ^2	p
Index						
Corruption	9.8	6	21.8	2	49.78	.000
Credible election	18.8	1	10.7	4	13.19	.000
Economy	**12.8**	**4**	**9.7**	**5**	**2.58**	**.108**
Infrastructure	13.5	3	3.9	8	24.33	.000
Power supply	9.8	6	26.0	1	91.15	.000
Security	17.2	2	12.0	3	5.82	.016
Social welfare	**8.3**	**8**	**8.4**	**6**	**0.01**	**.928**
Unemployment and poverty alleviation	**9.8**	**6**	**7.5**	**7**	**1.90**	**.169**
Total	**100.0**		**100.0**			
Homepage						
Corruption	14.2	3.5	21.8	2	14.42	.000
Credible election	16.5	2	10.7	4	7.48	.006
Economy	14.2	3.5	9.7	5	5.03	.025
Infrastructure	**6.3**	**7**	**3.9**	**8**	**3.02**	**.082**
Power supply	12.6	5	26.0	1	50.03	.000
Security	23.6	1	12.0	3	22.93	.000
Social welfare	**6.3**	**7**	**8.4**	**6**	**2.40**	**.122**
Unemployment and poverty alleviation	**6.3**	**7**	**7.5**	**7**	**0.77**	**.399**
Total	**100.0**		**100.0**			

In the homepage, however, security, credible election, corruption, and economy were high in the hierarchy of the emphasised issues. This means that two of the three topmost issues in the respondents' perceptions mirror the agenda of the issues in the homepage of the online newspapers. There is also a correspondence between the salience of infrastructure, social welfare, unemployment, and poverty alleviation in the online newspapers and perceptions of Nigerian students in Malaysia. The ranks of issues in the homepage of the online newspapers and respondents' perceptions are also closer than the ranks of issues in the indexed portion.

Table 3: Correspondence between the issues in the news story length and respondents' perceptions

Issues in News Story Length	Online Newspapers		Respondents' Perceptions		Chi-square	
	%	Rank	%	Rank	χ^2	p
Short News Story						
Corruption	8.9	6	21.8	2	62.76	.000
Credible election	17.8	2	10.7	4	10.57	.001
Economy	14.2	3	9.7	5	5.03	.025
Infrastructure	11.2	4.5	3.9	8	16.52	.000
Power supply	11.2	4.5	26.0	1	67.60	.000
Security	20.7	1	12.0	3	14.16	.000
Social welfare	**7.7**	**8**	**8.4**	**6**	**0.24**	**.625**
Unemployment and poverty alleviation	**8.3**	**7**	**7.5**	**7**	**0.28**	**.599**
Total	**100.0**		**100.0**			
Long News Story						
Corruption	**17.6**	**2.5**	**21.8**	**2**	**3.66**	**.056**
Credible election	17.6	2.5	10.7	4	10.07	.002
Economy	**12.1**	**4**	**9.7**	**5**	**1.61**	**.204**
Infrastructure	7.7	6.5	3.9	8	6.27	.012
Power supply	11.0	5	26.0	1	70.54	.000
Security	19.7	1	12.0	3	11.51	.001
Social welfare	**6.6**	**8**	**8.4**	**6**	**1.69**	**.193**
Unemployment and poverty alleviation	**7.7**	**6.5**	**7.5**	**7**	**0.02**	**.878**
Total	**100.0**		**100.0**			

As seen in Table 3, issues in the short news stories ranked security, credible election, and economy higher. Only security, however, appeared in the agenda of the issues perceived by the respondents. In addition, only the salience of social welfare together with unemployment and poverty alleviation correspond in the online newspapers and respondents' perceptions of important election issues.

Conversely, two of the three topmost issues in the long news stories correspond in rank with the hierarchy of issues perceived by the respondents. The rankings of other issues in the long news stories are, however, closer to the respondents' ranking of the issues. Besides, there are correspondences between the salience of corruption, economy, social welfare, and unemployment and poverty alleviation in the online newspapers and respondents' perceptions. This shows that issues covered in the long news stories predicted audience issue agenda better than issues covered in the short news stories.

Table 4: Spearman's Rho correlation between media and public agenda of the election issues

	Correlations		
Media/Public Agenda of Issues	N	r_s	p
Overall	8	.524	.091
News Story Location			
Index	8	.000	.500
Homepage	8	.626	.048
News Story Length			
Short	8	.323	.217
Long	8	.639	.044

The first hypothesis posited that the overall agenda of issues in the online newspapers correspond to the agenda of issues perceived by the Nigerian students in Malaysia. The results of Spearman's Rho correlation (Table 4) revealed a positive and moderate correlation between agenda of the issues in the online newspapers and respondents' perceptions (r_s=.524, N=8, p=.091). The result, however, is not statistically significant. The inability of the result to attain the Spearman's correlation critical threshold (N=8, r_s=+.64, p=.05) may be due to the small number of the issues examine. Hence, hypothesis 1 is not supported.

The second hypothesis predicted a significant correlation between the agenda of issues reported in the homepage of the online newspaper and the agenda of issues perceived by the Nigerian students in Malaysia. Table 4 revealed a strong, positive and significant correlation (r_s=+.626, N=8, p=.048), thus affirming the plausibility of the hypothesis. The absence of correlation between the issues covered in the index news story supports the notion that prominent display of news (homepage in the case of online newspapers) contributes to the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda.

The third hypothesis envisaged a positive and significant correlation between the agenda of issues in the long news stories and the agenda of issues perceived by Nigerian students in Malaysia. The result of the Spearman's Rho correlation yielded a strong, positive, and significant correlation (+.639, N=8, p=.044) between the agenda of the issues covered in the long news stories and agenda of issues held by Nigerian students in Malaysia. Conversely, the correlation between the agenda of issues covered in the short news stories and agenda of issues perceived by the respondents is weak and not significant. Overall, two of the three hypotheses testing the agenda-setting influence of online newspapers among diasporic audience were supported in this study. Given the exploratory nature of this study, these findings offer great promises for the examination of agenda-setting in the online media environment and among the increasing number of online news consumers.

Discussion

This study explored the viability of the online newspapers in setting the agenda of important societal issues, particularly among the diasporic audience. The results from the content analysis of selected Nigerian online newspapers and survey of Nigerian students in Malaysian institutions of higher learning provide modest support for the hypotheses raised. Conducted outside developed democracies where agenda-setting research has been found fruitful, these findings contribute to the intercultural validity of agenda-setting theory sought by agenda-setting scholars (McCombs, 2004, 2005; McCombs et al., 1997).

Although the overall issues in the online newspaper failed to correlate significantly with the issues perceived as salient by the Nigerian students in Malaysia, correspondences were found between the issues covered in the homepage news and long news stories.

This shows that online newspapers are equally imbued with attention grabbing cues like their print counterparts. Besides the positioning of the news and the amount of news hole dedicated to news stories, other cues in the online newspapers such as pictures, hyperlinks, and audio-visuals feature, etc., may contribute to the salience of issues reported in the online newspapers (Jeon, 2004).

Three possible reasons may be responsible for the modest support found in this study. Firstly, being outside the country, Nigerian students in Malaysia may not be accustomed to the contemporary challenges facing the citizens at home. Hence, their perceptions of important issues may have been influenced by lack of real world indicators to enhance their knowledge. Secondly, their social location in a country with differing socio-political and economic circumstances may have attenuated their appreciation of the homeland problems. Thirdly, being a developing democracy, Nigeria's media system still offers election coverage that is candidate-driven. Hence, mere reporting of candidates' campaigns may not adequately capture the issues that interest the generality of the citizens.

One consistent pattern noted in the results is that the issues that are given less attention in the online newspapers were not equally salient in the perceptions of Nigerian students in Malaysia. This perhaps explains the correspondence in the salience of social welfare as well as unemployment and poverty alleviation across all measures. Hence, the assertion that issues that are not given much attention in the media would hardly be in the public domain is thus sustained (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; DeFleur, 2010).

A significant consequence of these findings is the confirmation of the usefulness of digital homeland media to diasporic audience. The ability of homeland online media to orient diasporic community to issues affecting their kith and kin back home forms the basis of varying forms of diasporic nationalism such as mobilising for international influence on homeland socio-economic and political affairs, international support for candidates and political parties, and increasing requests for direct political participation via absentee/postal voting, among others. All these necessitate mediated political cognition, socialisation, and connection, which only digital homeland mainstream media can provide in abundance.

Since online media allows for interactive engagement between the news producers and news consumers, the findings of this study reveal a significant benefit that can be tapped by homeland news media. Finally, the readers' comments on the bulletin boards of online newspapers, for example, can offer additional perspectives on issues in the news. Besides, diasporic audiences' interest in homeland online media provides opportunity for a possible evolution of a new economic model that can augment dwindling revenue of the homeland mainstream media.

Conclusion

Although agenda-setting, as a theory of media effects, has received much support from the legacy media prism, the arrival of digital media opened a new agenda in the agenda-setting research. Based on conflictual findings that polarised scholars along 'efficacious' and 'attenuation' perspectives, a sea of studies have respectively supported and debunked agenda-setting theory in the digital media milieu. While those believing in the efficacy of online media to precipitate agenda-setting effects anchor their beliefs on redundancy of news, those arguing along attenuation believe in fluidity and volatility of news online.

The current study offers a modest support for the ability of the online news media to set agenda for the public. While the correlation for the overall issues is not statistically significant, agenda of issues in the homepage and issues reported in long stories correspond positively and significantly with the agenda of issues perceived by the respondents. The lack of correspondence in the agenda of the overall issues covered in the online newspapers and agenda of issues perceived by Nigerian students in Malaysia necessitates further inquiry. Possible contingencies such as perceived media credibility, individual differences, interest in politics, and interpersonal communication, among others need to be factored in when considering the influence of homeland media on the diasporic audience.

Being one of the few studies that explore the influence of homeland news online on the perceptions of homeland issues among diasporic audience, this study is constrained by a number of factors. One of the best ways to test agenda-setting influence of the media is to aggregate issues in a plethora of media platforms to create media agenda, which will be compared with the aggregate social agenda. However, this study used prominent issues in three online newspapers as surrogate for media agenda. Though in line with methods used in other studies (Golan &

Wanta, 2001; McCombs, et al., 1997), using aggregate media agenda in the online media would offer additional support to the viability of agenda-setting theory across media ecologies.

A key limitation of this study is the cross-sectional design adopted. One way to enhance the validity of this study in the future is to use a longitudinal design, which could properly account for a shift in the public agenda in relation to the media agenda. It is also important to explore contingent factors that moderate or mediate the influence of online news content on diasporic citizens. In addition, a study examining the second-level of agenda-setting, which incorporates both cognitive and affective dimensions of the news objects, is desirable.

Given the interest of the audience on candidates vying for election, examining the influence of online newspapers on audience perceptions of candidates' issue positions and attributes could provide a better understanding of how the online newspapers in particular, and online media in general, contribute to political socialization of foreign resident citizens in the contemporary trans-nationally mobile world.

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