

## Media and the Environment: Malaysian Press Coverage of the 1992 Earth Summit

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### ABSTRACT

*This analysis of news reports during June 1992 when the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro was held reveals wide coverage of environmental issues in major newspapers. Many stories were published each day, but the news tended to be dominated by government officials and spokespersons. Although reports on environmental work by ordinary citizens were not uncommon, only a few stories concerned scientific experts or activists. Predictably, stories about the Rio meetings frequently concerned forestry management, but a range of other topics received attention also. One of the newspapers mounted its own environmental campaign to arouse readers' awareness of ecological problems. On the whole, the findings suggest that because government figures appear to overshadow all other parties as protectors of the environment in news reports, efforts to encourage individual action may be nullified.*

### ABSTRAK

*Analisis laporan berita di sepanjang bulan Jun 1992 semasa Persidangan Puncak Bumi diadakan di Rio de Janeiro menunjukkan liputan yang luas mengenai isu-isu alam sekitar oleh akhbar-akhbar utama. Banyak berita diterbitkan setiap hari, tetapi berita-berita ini mempunyai kecenderungan untuk memusat kepada pegawai-pegawai dan wakil-wakil kerajaan. Walaupun kerja-kerja berhubung dengan alam sekitar yang dilakukan oleh orang awam masih kedapatan, tetapi berita mengenai pakar sains dan aktivis adalah amat terhad. Seperti yang dijangka, berita mengenai perjumpaan di Rio sering menyentuh tentang pengurusan hutan, tetapi topik-topik lain juga mendapat perhatian. Sebuah daripada akhbar tersebut menganjurkan kempen alam sekitarnya sendiri untuk membangkitkan kesedaran pembaca tentang masalah ekologi. Secara keseluruhannya, penemuan-penemuan ini mencadangkan bahawa oleh kerana pegawai-pegawai kerajaan kelihatan seolah-olah mendahului kesemua kumpulan lain sebagai pelindung alam sekitar dalam laporan-laporan berita, maka usaha untuk menggalakkan tindakan individu mungkin tidak memberi apa-apa kesan.*

## THE MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION

Media's importance in shaping attitudes on the environment is generally accepted, and government officials routinely rely on press and broadcasting to generate support for their policy initiatives. However, the linkage between public opinion and public policy is complex, and researchers and critics have struggled to understand their relationship. Among the questions considered have been the actions needed to attract media attention, the proper role of government agencies in consciousness-raising, and the means of minimizing political consequences of environmental protection.

Correction of ecological problems depends on public recognition of needed reforms. According to Dunlap (1989:87), an awareness of ecological issues in the 1960s arose when "a wide range of threats to environmental quality began to attract the attention of the media, policy makers, and the public." Trop and Roos (1971:52) pointed to "publicized attention resulting from the politicization of issues" as the cause of "higher levels of concern, priority, and commitment to seeking a cure for environmental problems."

How the media heighten awareness appears to depend on one's point of view, and a range of positions between two widely divergent perspectives can be identified. On the one hand, Tokar (1987:94-95) wrote that,

television is clearly the source of many . . . mass cultural manipulations. . . . It is intrinsically anti-social, brings an inflated system of manufactured needs into nearly everyone's home and it offers only the emptiest of role models.

Because of his belief in media's negative effects, he urged environmentally active citizens to "create community institutions that are self-consciously removed from the manipulations of mass culture and mass society" (1987:102). At another extreme, Grayson and Shepard (1973:129-130) argued that

. . . throughout history there have been legions of men and women who insisted that calamity was just around the corner or that butterflies were more desirable than human beings. There was no way, however for them to get their ideas across to large enough groups of their fellow citizens. . . . Then along came television, and the problem was solved. Suddenly, the world-is-coming-to-an-end folks could reach tens of millions of people in a single evening.

A comparable, if less belligerent, view was echoed by Starheim and Steen (1991:98) who found in their analysis of public opinion on acid rain that

media portrayal of the issues [did not provide] a full and fair characterization but imparted to the public a greater perception of hazard or risk than usually warranted.

Despite these unfavorable characterizations, most environmentalists believe media can play a constructive role. Dixy Lee Ray in *Trashing the Planet* (1990:9) observed that most people get their scientific knowledge not from educational institutions but from ". . . television, and, to a lesser extent,

from newspapers, radio, and news magazines.” She cautioned that accuracy and intelligibility of the information provided depended upon the skills and knowledge of media professionals, and emphasized that

scientists, technologists, and engineers do not and can not inform the public directly. The media inform the public, and, in doing so, act as an information filter.

Presumably, this information filter mediates not only between scientists and the general public, but also between scientists and other elites—that is, politicians, educators, and other opinion leaders.

The nature of this filtering was the subject of Maloney and Slovonsky’s (1971) study of the beliefs of newspaper editors. Noting that complexities of environmental issues present “more than ample opportunity for the public to become confused rather than enlightened,” (1971:65) they sought to determine whether editors thought a consensus was then emerging on the topic’s salience. The researchers found that among 56 editors of dailies in localities designated as having high levels of air pollution, all but one agreed that the threat to the environment would be one of the top news stories of the decade of the 1970s. The authors discovered that concern about these issues was highest in industrialized cities where pollution was greatest. During a sample month, newspapers in larger cities published twice the number of local environmental stories as newspapers in smaller cities and roughly the same larger proportion of editorials. The study concluded that editors believed the press is responsible for “putting the problem in perspective and providing the public with a forum for serious discussion that appeals to reason and avoids hysteria” (1971:78).

Rubin and Sachs’ (1973) case study of media environmental coverage in California’s Bay Area is a thorough treatment of the subject. In spite of its lack of balance and its authors’ overly-simplified grasp of media’s inner workings, the study stands as a provocative and instructive work. Among the findings offered were: “the pseudo-event is the news peg that is a necessary condition for press coverage” (1973:112), and “advertiser pressure can influence media content and lower the quality of environmental news coverage” (1973:191).

In summary, theoretical models for explaining media’s influence on public environmental attitudes are still crude at best. While awareness of issues is a vital precondition to altered behavior, the resulting behavior may be out of proportion to the risks involved, due to media’s capacity to distort the significance of hazards. A key factor in media effectiveness is editors’ and reporters’ use of scientifically-based assessments of ecological problems and their understandable communication to ordinary readers, viewers, and listeners. Yet, the field has been subject to emotionalism and irrationality, exaggerated by tactics such as the staging of pseudo-events and by journalists’ lack of technical knowledge. However, these generalizations are mainly

based on experiences in Europe and North America. There is a need to study media's performance on the environment outside the industrialized West.

## ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY AND THE MALAYSIAN NEWS AGENDA

*New Straits Times* journalist Rusdi (1991:62) expressed a commonly-held optimism about Malaysian ecological policy when he suggested that "on the whole, while Malaysians may suffer from all the ailments faced by any other developing country, she in her own unique way is doing something to preserve the environment." However, Sham (1991) characterized the Malaysian conservation picture as "mixed," with certain sectors receiving particular attention, notably that of deforestation in East Malaysia. He indicated that environmental policy is aimed at achieving "sustainable development with the least disruption to the environment." According to him, this strategy is based upon a "greater emphasis on preventive rather than curative" measures (1991:96).

Many have commented on the special importance of media in promulgating Malaysian government policy. Hamdan (1985:18) identified media as "*orang tengah*" between government and the public, but he also underscored the importance of media as "watchdog" or "*pengawas*." At the same time, critics have remarked on the dangers of overly close ties between government and media. Kahirul (1989:66) observed that

official pressure on the media can be great. Politicians and government officials have been known to label newspapers and journalists as "thoughtful" if they are pro-government and "irresponsible" if they are anti-government. On occasions, the Home Ministry or a government department has called in erring reporters for a stern lecture.

Similarly, Lent (1989:19), in writing of Asian media generally, but referring specifically to Malaysia, asserts that media are ". . . implored to support and co-operate . . . by supporting governmental plans and ideology." One danger in government leadership of environmental reform is that solutions will come to be regarded as a responsibility of authorities, rather than a responsibility of the public. This obviously works against the need to adjust personal behavior to environmentally friendly practices, such as recycling, ecologically prudent consumption, and so on. Indeed, in the author's study of development news on Malaysian TV, more than 90% of development stories featured political figures prominently. This led to the conclusion that TV coverage presented an image of development "as an activity of the influential and politically powerful" (McDaniel 1986:170).

Malaysia's late Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak appreciated media's role as intermediaries between Government and the people. In 1974, he warned against the abuse of public trust, advising that ". . . all those [media

professionals] concerned should take heed that whatever is published for the general public should not cause misunderstanding" (cited in Grenfell 1979:7). As Badri (1991:15) later remarked, "journalism has come a long way to witness the day when the fragile earth depends so highly on the competency and proficiency of journalists." Environmental issues' complexities impose a heavy burden on media. Reports must explain problems simply and clearly, and make sense of partisans' conflicting viewpoints. Friedman and Friedman (1989) found in their survey of Asian environmental journalism that media were not well equipped for this challenge, and noted censorship, interference by powerful private interests, and a lack of knowledgeable reporters as among the most serious impediments.

To enhance media coverage of the environment, the Asian Forum of Environmental Journalists was founded in 1985. This organization aims "to train, inform, support and reward their members as part of a regional scheme to upgrade the overall standard of environmental reporting" (Jalal 1992:47). Support of environmental reportage also comes from organizations such as the Asian Mass Communication Information Centre, based in Singapore, and the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development in Kuala Lumpur. In 1992, for instance, the latter organization hosted two training courses for broadcast producers aimed at improving their ability to make programs for the purpose of making audiences aware of "the need to be involved in environmental concerns" (AIBD 1992:1).

Chelliah has pointed to media's accomplishments (1991:34), suggesting that "the impact of printed media in enhancing environmental awareness in the region is commendable . . . [and the media] play an important role in getting the messages across to the public and concerned groups." As evidence, she cites the large number of Malaysian publications wholly or mainly devoted to environmental issues. Among these are *Suara SAM*, the *Environment News Digest Bulletin*, and *Alam Pelangi*. While impressive, and no doubt reflective of a strong sentiment among committed professionals and activists, none of these specialized publications reach a mass audience and it is not likely they have much impact on most citizens' understanding of issues. What is more important is the treatment given environmental subjects in the Malaysia's largest mass-circulation publications.

#### A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF MALAYSIAN DAILIES

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, often termed the Earth Summit, took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, June 3-14, 1992. Called the most important meeting on environmental issues in more than a decade, it attracted delegates from more than 170 nations, culminating more than two years of multinational negotiations. About 35,000 participants attended the sessions, and an estimated 8,000 journalists covered its activities.

The Global Forum, an affiliated event for nongovernmental organizations staged nearby attracted an additional 15,000 persons.

One of the most discussed initiatives at the conference had a particular significance for Malaysia, the "Statement on Forest Principles." Debate on the proposal continued throughout the event, with countries tending to take positions based on loose coalitions along East-West, North-South, and rich nation-poor nation lines. Malaysian authorities seized the opportunity to confront its critics. As Wen Lian Ting, Malaysia's chief negotiator on forests argued in a pre-summit briefing, "forests are clearly a sovereign resource—not like atmosphere and oceans, which are global commons. We cannot allow forests to be taken up in global forums" ("Key Remarks" 1992). Such statements were reported in the world press and detailed explanation and analysis appeared in the domestic media.

Survey Research Malaysia (1990) claims 56 percent of adults in Peninsular Malaysia read a newspaper each day, a level up slightly from the 52 percent reported in 1980. Even in the countryside, newspapers are popular. A 1980 case study by Razali (cited in Ahmad 1983) found 80 percent of farmers in Kampung Pasir Panjang Laut in Perak read newspapers regularly at home or in coffeeshops. The largest block of readers prefer to use Bahasa Malaysia. Two major national dailies *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* (both *rumi* or roman script publications) each have a readership of around 225,000 (Clad 1985) for their weekday issues. The two largest English-language dailies, the *New Straits Times* and *The Star*, average a weekday circulation of approximately 160,000 copies. National dailies in Tamil, Chinese, and in *jawi* script Malay form an important part of total newspaper circulation, but their readerships are smaller and less diverse. Readership of Bahasa Malaysia newspapers has grown greatly, due to government policies boosting the national language, and after 1980 English newspapers circulation declined. This trend reversed beginning in 1989. From a low of 1.06 million copies, combined English circulation bounced back to 1.24 million by the end of 1991 ("Riding Malaysia's readership" 1991).

To evaluate coverage of environmental issues, three national newspapers, *The New Straits Times*, *Utusan Malaysia*, and *Berita Harian* were studied during the month of June, 1992, a sample period coinciding with the Rio Summit on the Environment, covering days before, during, and after the meetings. Because these newspapers have the widest circulation, they tend to represent centrist viewpoints, in contrast to the more radical positions sometimes offered by specialized publications. The content analysis considered five questions about newspaper reporting on the environment:

- Who were portrayed as the chief actors concerning ecological problems—government authorities, scientists, activists, or just common folk?
- Who were cited as sources of environmental information—scientists, officials, or activists?

- Did coverage stem from reportorial work on the part of journalists, or from pseudo-events such as staged actions, news releases, news conferences, demonstrations, and the like?
- What proportion of environmental news involved local stories. Did stories suggest international polarization along the lines of North-South or rich country-poor country alignments?
- Which environmental threats received greatest coverage during the sample period?

**Methodology.** All non-advertising content—editorial cartoons, letters from readers, and pieces from opinion-editorial pages, as well as regular news stories—were selected for study. Each story's length (in column-inches) was recorded as an index of the relative importance editors gave stories.

Items concerning environmental topics were obtained from the newspapers separately by the researcher and an assistant. A comparison of their story selections served as a measure of rating reliability. Agreement remained above 80% across the sample, a level considered satisfactory. Final ratings of all items were made by the author. For each story the following were recorded: the main actor, the type of event reported, the principal source of information cited, the location and international implications of issues discussed, and the specific ecological threat described by the report. Main actors in stories were those judged to be the primary cause of or participants in actions described. Stories were categorized according to whether coverage seemed to be prompted by speeches, news conferences, demonstrations or other staged events, wire service accounts, news releases, or the newspaper reporters themselves. News sources were the individuals or organizations providing information mentioned in reports. International constructs in accounts included North-South, East-West, rich nations-poor nations, developing-developed nations, and a general global orientation. Among the environmental threats coded were marine and coastal ecology, ozone layer and climate change, air pollution, waste management, biodiversity, forestry practices, and so on.

**Environmental coverage.** During the one-month period, 519 environmental stories appeared in the three papers. Table 1 shows their distribution. The mean length of environmental stories was greater in the *New Straits Times*, with *Berita Harian* close behind, and *Utusan Malaysia* last. The *New Straits Times* provided substantially more coverage than either of the Bahasa Malaysia newspapers. The difference was due partly to the *New Straits Times*' greater length, but an environmental campaign during the sample month inflated its coverage as well. Known as the *New Straits Times* National Environment Education Programme, it promoted citizen responsibility for ecological protection.

TABLE 1. Coverage of environmental topics during June 1992

Newspapers	Dates	Number of Stories	Total Column Inches	Average Story Length
<i>Berita Harian</i>	June 1-15	113	2,689.2	23.8
	June 16-30	32	540.3	16.9
	SUBTOTAL	145	3,229.5	22.3
<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	June 1-15	82	1,558.3	19.0
	June 16-30	17	432.1	25.4
	SUBTOTAL	100	1,990.4	19.9
<i>New Straits Times</i>	June 1-15	189	4,172.8	22.2
	June 16-30	85	2,297.1	27.0
	SUBTOTAL	274	6,469.9	23.7
TOTAL		518	11,689.8	22.5

Table 1 also compares news reports in the first and last halves of the month. The Rio Summit took place in the first half, and expanded environmental coverage during its sessions is evident in each newspaper. The trend was most pronounced in *Utusan Malaysia* where 82.0% of the month's environmental news appeared in the first 15 days of June. During the same time, *Berita Harian* presented 77.9% and the *New Straits Times* published just 69.0% of the month's environmental coverage.

To discover whom the newspapers offered as major actors in stories, Table 2 was compiled. It shows that approximately two-thirds of the reports in all newspapers depicted government or political officials as the main figures in environmental actions. Ordinary citizens ranked second, appearing as key actors in 13.5% of stories overall. For the *New Straits Times*, business and industry figures represented 16.1% of the main actors, whereas the Bahasa Malaysia newspapers featured them much less frequently. Surprisingly, scientists and technical experts were minor actors, and less than 3% of the stories focused on them. Representatives of non-governmental organizations and activists appeared as main actors only occasionally; the highest proportion was in *Utusan Malaysia* where they accounted for 9.0% of all stories studied. The Rio Summit was primarily a meeting of officials, so reports on events there naturally tended to concern officials' activities. To examine



TABLE 2. Main actors in stories on environmental topics

	Newspapers							
	Berita Harian		Utusan Malaysia		New Straits Times		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Government and political officials	100	69.0%	69	69.0%	147	53.6%	316	60.9%
Ordinary individuals	19	13.1	11	11.0	40	14.6	70	13.5
Business and industry figures	6	4.1	6	6.0	44	16.1	56	10.8
Scientists and technical experts	3	2.0	0	0.0	8	2.9	11	2.1
NGO representatives and activists	0	0.0	9	9.0	17	6.2	26	5.0
Other or none	17	11.8	5	5.0	18	6.6	40	7.7
TOTAL	145	100.0%	100	100.0%	274	100.0%	519	100.0%

TABLE 3. Main actors in stories on environmental topics during June 16-39

	Newspapers							
	Berita Harian		Utusan Malaysia		New Straits Times		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Government and political officials	19	59.4%	9	52.9%	38	44.7%	66	49.3%
Ordinary individuals	7	21.8	2	11.8	17	20.0	26	19.4
Business and industry figures	3	9.4	2	11.8	19	22.4	24	17.9
Scientists and technical experts	1	3.1	0	0.0	3	3.5	4	3.0
NGO representatives and activists	0	0.0	1	5.9	4	4.7	5	3.7
Other or none	2	6.3	3	17.6	4	4.7	9	6.7
TOTAL	32	100.0%	17	100.0%	85	100.0%	134	100.0%

environmental coverage without the distorting effects of the Earth Summit, the distribution of major actors in stories was examined in the second half of June, after the Summit. The results appear in Table 3. As can be seen, the overall pattern is little different from that shown for the entire month, except that governmental and political officials' share of each paper's news coverage was smaller while laypersons' and businesspersons' portion was larger.

Table 4 presents a summary of source attributions in environmental stories. The findings roughly parallel those on main actors. Political and government officials were the leading sources of information, constituting about 60% of all citations. In the *New Straits Times*, business sources were a distant second, but the Bahasa Malaysia newspapers used a variety of secondary sources including scientists and technical experts, NGO spokespersons and activists. In about 10% of the stories, sources were either unclear or could not be categorized.

TABLE 4. Source attribution in stories on environmental topics

	Newspapers							
	Berita Harian		Utusan Malaysia		New Straits Times		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Government and political officials	89	61.4%	68	68.0%	158	57.7%	315	60.7%
Scientists and technical experts	9	6.2	3	3.0	14	5.1	26	5.0
Business and industry figures	7	4.8	5	5.0	33	12.0	45	8.7
NGO representatives and activists	10	6.9	1	1.0	18	6.6	29	5.6
Ordinary individuals	6	4.1	7	7.0	17	3.5	30	5.8
Laws, documents, and regulations	5	3.5	0	0.0	6	2.2	11	2.1
Multiple sources	1	0.7	0	0.0	2	0.7	3	0.6
Other or Unclear	18	12.4	16	17.6	26	9.5	60	11.5
TOTAL	145	100.0%	100	100.0%	274	100.0%	519	100.0%

A tabulation of the apparent causes of news coverage appears in Table 5. Across the board, journalists seemed to instigate coverage of stories, and only a small portion of the total reportage resulted from managed activities. Staged events and demonstrations accounted for less than 2% of all stories.

Wire service reports were the source of an unexpectedly large share of environmental news, particularly in the *New Straits Times* where they totaled nearly one-fourth of all stories.

TABLE 5. Origin of environmental stories

	Newspapers							
	Berita Harian		Utusan Malaysia		New Straits Times		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Journalist reportage	64	44.1	54	54.0	141	51.4	259	49.9
Speech or conference	11	7.6	1	1.0	19	6.9	31	6.0
News release	2	1.4	0	0.0	3	1.1	5	1.0
Demonstration or staged activity	2	1.4	0	0.0	8	2.9	10	1.9
Press briefing or news conference	28	19.3	18	18.0	23	8.4	69	13.3
Wire service	13	9.0	19	19.0	67	24.5	99	19.1
Letters to the editor	1	0.7	0	0.0	9	3.3	10	1.9
Formal Earth Summit action	20	13.8	7	7.0	0	0.0	27	5.2
Other or unclear	4	2.7%	1	1.0%	4	1.5%	9	1.7%
TOTAL	145	100.0%	100	100.0%	274	100.0%	519	100.0%

Table 6 compares coverage of local and foreign environmental news. The *New Straits Times* alone devoted a majority of its environmental coverage to local matters, a total of slightly more than 55% of all reports published. In contrast, only 16% of *Utusan Malaysia's* reports concerned domestic topics. A large portion of the stories in all papers dealt with global issues in a way that did not suggest international polarization. Variations among the newspapers otherwise were minor, and North-South and rich nation-poor nation splits characterized all but a few of the other international stories.

The range of environmental issues covered appears in Table 7. Most stories concerned no specific threat, but dealt rather with general ecological hazards. Not surprisingly, the single issue that gained greatest attention was forest management, although the *New Straits Times* gave slightly more coverage to waste treatment and recycling. Coastal and maritime protection was prominent in the dailies due to a serious mishap during the sample period. An oil tanker fire occurred at the Shell depot in Port Klang on June

TABLE 6. International constructs in stories on environmental topics

	Newspapers							
	Berita Harian		Utusan Malaysia		New Straits Times		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
No international dimension	49	33.8%	16	16.0%	151	55.1%	216	41.6%
North - South	21	14.5	5	5.0	21	7.7	47	9.0
East - West	1	0.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.2
Socialist - Capitalist	0	0.0	1	1.0	0	0.0	1	0.2
Rich - Poor	17	11.7	17	17.0	22	8.0	56	10.8
Foreign - domestic	1	0.7	1	1.0	0	0.0	2	0.4
General global	56	38.6	60	60.0	80	29.2	196	37.8
TOTAL	145	100.0%	100	100.0%	274	100.0%	518	100.0%

TABLE 7. Environmental issues in environmental stories

	Newspapers							
	Berita Harian		Utusan Malaysia		New Straits Times		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Air pollution	7	4.8%	0	0.0%	14	5.1%	21	4.0%
Forest management	24	16.4	16	16.0	53	19.3	93	17.9
Soil erosion and river siltration	1	0.7	0	0.0	2	0.7	3	0.6
Water pollution	1	0.7	2	2.0	0	0.0	3	0.6
Coastal and maritime pollution	11	7.6	0	0.0	10	3.6	21	4.0
Waste and recycling	10	6.9	1	1.0	60	21.9	71	13.7
Biodiversity	4	2.8	6	6.0	18	6.6	28	5.4
Ozone and climate change	2	1.4	6	6.0	7	2.6	15	2.9
Overpopulation	3	2.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	0.6
General ecological hazards	76	52.4	61	61.0	104	38.0	241	46.4
No threats mentioned	6	4.2	8	8.0	6	2.2	20	3.9
TOTAL	145	100.0%	100	100.0%	274	100.0%	519	100.0%

21, and for a few days there was a danger of sea pollution from the resulting spillage. *Berita Harian* gave the story greatest attention, producing a total of 11 stories on the disaster and other maritime pollution problems during the month.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Government figures figured conspicuously in news throughout the period studied. They appeared in accounts both as main actors and sources of information on the environment. Although their prominence declined after the summit meetings, officials remained central figures in reports. The proportion of government news stories, even following the Earth Summit, was substantially higher than the author discovered in an analysis of news on Malaysian private television. That study (McDaniel 1990), which examined English news on TV3, found only 29% of stories centered on actions of government authorities.

Neither scientists nor technical experts appeared often in stories, and their absence was puzzling and troubling. Similarly, activists seldom were featured. In contrast, laypersons regularly played conspicuous roles, and about one in five stories in the final half of the sample month focused on them. The place of business leaders in these issues was emphasized by the *New Straits Times* where they were second in importance only to government officials. As sources of information authorities had little competition. No other category received frequent attribution, with the possible exception of business figures who were cited in about 12% of *New Straits Times*' stories.

Presenting officials in key positions again and again may detract from the importance of ordinary men and women. Readers might begin to think of environmental protection as a matter concerning authorities and not themselves. Moreover, if a function of news is to instruct the public on appropriate social conduct, the message can be muddled by focusing on the acts of national and state leaders. Recycling, waste management, prudent consumption and other aspects of individual behavior got very little attention during the sample month. Even though laypersons were the second most frequently seen figures, more than a few stories featuring them were on the vague subject of "greening" the environment. This seemed to translate, particularly in the Bahasa Malaysia newspapers, into plantings of trees and shrubbery. However beneficial this may be from an aesthetic standpoint, such actions are unlikely to have much ecological impact. A typical report of this type appeared in *Berita Harian* on June 16. Headlined "*Kuala Lumpur Sentiasa Hijau, Indah*" ("Kuala Lumpur" 1992), the story drew an explicit connection between the Earth Summit and the work of Kuala Lumpur city employees (DBKL), but the photo and action described only the planting of flowers on city property.

Generally speaking, environmental stories originated from field work by reporters, rather than from actions by demonstrators or activists. At most, 3% of the reports were prompted by staged events. Even so, it is clear that those outside the media can influence coverage. The categories of "demonstration or staged activity" together with "news conferences" came to roughly 15% of all news stories. Publicity events did attract coverage by newspapers, and some organizations, particularly the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), successfully used the tactic during the sample month. For example, a report appeared in the *New Straits Times* about a charity walk organized by WWF and sponsored by the Yaohan department store. The five-kilometer event drew 2,000 participants and raised \$20,000 (2000 walk 1992). Comparable events were reported in *Berita Harian*, but curiously not in *Utusan Malaysia*.

Although newspapers gave attention to the environment because of the Earth Summit, they presented little coverage of formal actions, concentrating instead on political debates and maneuvering among representatives at the meetings. Just 5.2% of all stories during the month originated from actions on the conference floor. Reports mainly concerned wrangling over forest management, biodiversity, and climate change.

Only the *New Straits Times* favored domestic aspects of environmental problems; other newspapers emphasized international issues. Most global stories were general in nature, but two specific themes emerged in reports. First, rich nations' ecological bad habits were commonly contrasted with the unfair economic burden shouldered by poor nations. Malaysia supported a proposal that each developed country contribute a share of its wealth with a fund for developing nations, mainly through the Overseas Development Assistance program (ODA) and the General Environment Facility (GEF). The second specific theme was a clash between North and South, frequently revolving around the United States' intransigence on an assortment of ecological issues. All newspapers reported on the Bush administration's refusal to sign a biodiversity convention and its sidetracking of a timetable for carbon dioxide reductions in a climate change treaty.

## CONCLUSION

Environmental reports were extensive, with an average of more than 17 stories published daily in the three newspapers combined. Among the papers, the *New Straits Times* gave the most coverage. It also championed environmental causes through its own campaign for public awareness and action. This newspaper also gave particular attention to the role of business and industry in problem-solving. Although government actions dominated news stories, the dailies regularly published examples of ordinary citizens' efforts to improve the environment. Unfortunately, some stories sent readers confusing messages, blurring the distinction between an attractive environment

and a healthful and sustainable environment. Individuals with the greatest stake in these issues, activists and scientific experts, played minor roles in stories, not only as actors but also as sources of information. Government officials mostly served up facts reported in the stories, and in the end, the chief concern raised by the findings was that dominance of the news by authorities could be counter-productive, deflecting readers' attention from their own environmental responsibilities.

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