

SARAWAK MALAYS AND DEVELOPMENT AGENDA IN THE NEWSPAPER

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ABSTRACT

Research has focused on newspaper content and news pattern using the development media framework but few studies have investigated the impact of ethnicity on newspaper content. This study examined the media portrayal of Sarawak Malays in the year 2000 and the role of newspaper owners in the selection and publication of news. An English newspaper, *The Sarawak Tribune*, owned by a Melanau with political links to the Sarawak government was chosen. Using content analysis, data collected were classified into 18 news categories. This study incorporates the analysis of news patterns and interviews with the editors. Findings indicate that the Sarawak Malays are mostly reported in news concerning community activities, followed by court and crime news; physical development and human development; education; and sports. The news patterns also suggest a patriarchal relationship between leaders and community which is the basis for social activities among the Sarawak Malay community. In conclusion, news concerning the Sarawak Malays was given fair coverage by the newspapers despite being owned by the Melanau. Thus, it is recommended that future studies continue to investigate similar issues in different newspapers by adopting a more comprehensive conceptualisation of development which is presented in the news reporting. Consistent with the media development theory, the proposed framework enables researchers to reflect the state development aspirations in a holistic manner.

Keywords: Sarawak, Malays, newspaper, development media theory, media ownership

INTRODUCTION

As a traditional media, the newspaper has long been recognised as an important channel to disseminate information to the public. Unlike western countries that emphasise the check-and-balance approach towards issues reported, the government in developing countries heavily relies on traditional media to highlight government-initiated development projects and policies. In research on development media in Malaysia, the term “development” has been conceptualised narrowly to refer to news categories that represent development, namely, political personalities, economic, educational, political, and human resource development. In the present study, however, we argued that development should be seen in a wider scope in line with the traditional press system in Malaysia which is strongly affiliated with politics. In this sense, all news reported in the newspaper is considered development news according to the framework of the

gatekeepers of the media organisation. The main agenda of these gatekeepers is to highlight the development, either tangible or intangible, which reflects the support of media towards the government's effort to promote development in the country. The data for the study were derived from archived newspapers dated in 2000 when Malaysia, particularly Sarawak, was in the era of rapid development. This study examined the media portrayal of Sarawak Malays in the year 2000 in a newspaper owned by the Melanaus, and the role of the newspaper owners in the selection and publication of news.

Ethnic Malay of Sarawak and Development

In the case of Malaysia, the National Development Policy (1991-2000) was a plan to turn the country into a developed nation by the year 2020. The policy is a continuation of the New Economic Policy (1971-1990). Both policies have been instrumental in bridging the gap of socio-economic well-being among the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. As a result of such an affirmative policy, Malaysia has become one of the reputable countries in terms of development among the developing nations.

Despite registering a relatively slower growth in comparison with other states in Malaysia, Sarawak had benefited from the national development. This is clearly indicated in the 7th Malaysia Plan (1996-2000) which saw Sarawak among the states in Malaysia recording a steady economic growth in manufacturing, agriculture based industry and mining sectors of between 14.7% and 19.4% annually (Economic Planning Unit 1996-2000, n.d). Concurring with the positive development in Peninsular Malaysia, Pehin Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud (Taib Mahmud), the then Chief Minister of Sarawak introduced the state-level development policy termed as the politics of development initiated in 1992. Specifically, the politics of development is a concept to develop the state of Sarawak based on political stability, consensus, prosperity and equality (Khoo 2011). Furthermore, Mahmud (2000) emphasised that equitable development can be achieved with a fair distribution of development projects to all ethnic groups. Such an inclusive policy aspired to develop the diverse community in Sarawak that comprises more than 27 ethnic groups.

The Sarawak Malay ranked as the second largest indigenous ethnic group in Sarawak after the Iban and the population was estimated at 462,270 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak 2001). As the study focused on media portrayal of Sarawak Malays in the year 2000, the population statistics are given for the year 2001 rather than for the year 2016. In comparison with other middle class population or ethnic groups, the Sarawak Malay working class was behind in terms of economic and educational achievements (Ahmad Ishak 2011; Puteh 2005). Moreover, many of the Sarawak Malays were still living in rural and suburban areas resulting in them lagging behind in enjoying basic amenities such as good physical infrastructure.

The original settlements of Sarawak Malays were both in the urban areas like Kuching, Sibu and Miri as well as in rural areas like Samarahan, Bekenu and Lundu. Historically, most of the pioneering settlers of the Sarawak Malays in Kuching belonged to the elite group who were appointed as administrators to assist the Brooke family (1841-1941) who hailed from Great Britain (Puteh 2005). Meanwhile, the Sarawak Malays who resided in the coastal and riverine areas were known as the coastal Malays. The main traditional occupation of these coastal communities was fishing (Harrisson 1970). A study of coastal communities in the

South-western part of Sarawak in 2006 found that 64.8% of the 800 respondents worked as fishermen (Hassan 2006).

Rapid urbanisation and migration had brought significant changes to the community in Sarawak (Ali 2006). For example, the population of Kuching had increased tremendously as a result of the rural-urban migration. Kuching Division had the highest population of Sarawak Malays, compared to other indigenous ethnic groups, totalling 180,957 which is 39.15% of the total Sarawak Malay population in the state (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak 2001). In terms of politics, there was a competition for power between Taib Mahmud and the Sarawak Malay aristocrats (Chin 2004). In the state assembly pre-election 2001, Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha, who is a descendant of the *perabangan* (aristocrats) among the Sarawak Malays expressed his intention to contest against Taib Mahmud. Despite the existence of such a political contest, politics has not triggered any physical altercation between ethnic groups. Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) led by Taib Mahmud is a party which brings together various ethnic groups comprising various indigenous people, including ethnic Malay, Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu. In addition, the PBB also represents the Bumiputera Muslim leaders' political dominance backed by the support of ethnic Melanaus, Malays and Kedayans (Said 1985). Nowadays, the terms "Malays/Melanaus or Malay-Melanaus" are used by the press in reporting social and cultural issues (see Borneo Post Online 2012; Sabang 2013).

The Sarawak Tribune

Since the 1960s, radio, television and newspaper have become the main channels to disseminate information regarding the country's development. For the print media, when *Utusan Melayu* was taken over by the United Malays National Organizations (UMNO), one of the Barisan Nasional component parties, it became the unofficial newspaper of the ruling party mainly targeting the Malay audience in Malaya. This era marked the emergence of ethnic-based press with the agenda to publish news in order to protect the interests and identities of the Malay, and ensure the dissemination of information to advance the respective ethnic groups.

Meanwhile, in Sarawak, an English-language newspaper known as The Sarawak Tribune was published by the Sarawak Press Limited Company. According to Taha (1985), the company was originally owned by a Chinese businessman. Later on, in 1979 he sold 10% of his shares to a Bumiputera which was in line with the government's policy to encourage the participation of Bumiputera in business. Since then, the ownership of the Sarawak Press Limited Company has been dominated by the Melanaus. The original owner of the media organisation around the year 1995 was the late Mahmud Arip Mohd, followed by Datuk Awang Bemee Awang Ali Basah and then Datuk Wahab Dollah¹. The newspaper ownership was transferred to Datuk Hanifah Taib in 2000 and she has remained the owner of the press company until today. There are Melanau entrepreneurs who are involved directly and indirectly with PBB, a political party that ruled Sarawak. The PBB's leader, Abdul Taib Mahmud was a former Chief Minister (1981-2014) originating from the Melanau ethnic group. Despite the dominance by the Melanau ownership of the media organisation since the year 2000, The Sarawak Tribune (TST) has an ethnically diverse editorial staff numbering 58 which consisted of 13 Malays, 22 Chinese and 23 other

¹ Interview with Awang Safri Awang Adeni, Executive Editor of *Utusan Sarawak* on 25th March 2014.

indigenous ethnic groups^{2,3}. Newspaper circulation at that time was about 35,000 copies daily and TST had offices in Kuching, Sibul, Miri, Bintulu and bureau offices in certain districts.

Based on the ownership of TST, it can be surmised that the company focuses more on their own ethnic interest in their publications consistent with the ethnic-based press model and practices in Peninsular Malaysia. Given the Melanau ownership of the press company, it is important to find out whether the newspaper represents other indigenous groups particularly the Sarawak Malays.

Media and Agenda of Development

Development in the Malaysian context refers to a process of improving the living conditions of specific target groups based on the framework of the New Economic Policy (Rahim 1992). It can also be based on other development strategies such as the Eighth Malaysia Plan (Sarmiti 2004). According to Hachten (1999), governments in developing countries rely on the media to disseminate information about development. McQuail (1987) outlines five key principles of the theory of Development Media. Media should: (1) accept and work for the success of national development policies; (2), promote development; (3), prioritise the broadcasting of national news; (4), limit the goal of press freedom; and (5) see justification of media control for development.

News in development media depends on internal criteria (news value) and external criteria (e.g., events, the hierarchy of senior staff, the owners of the press). According to Ramanathan, media operating under the framework of the development produces news based on news value such as “what sells newspapers”, “the importance of religion”, “cultural significance”, “social interests and needs of the country” (cited in Othman, Mat Nayan, & Lee 2013, p. 55). With regard to journalism practices, there are differences in terms of selecting news stories between Malaysian press and its Western counterparts. In the West, the press emphasises the value of timeliness, proximity to the public, conflict and unusual events (Mencher 2003). In contrast, the Malaysian press relies more on external factors, namely, the best event on that day, the hierarchical order in the media organisation, the ownership of the media, the readership, and the experiences of journalists (Othman, Mat Nayan & Lee 2013).

In the context of Malaysian press, the study of Othman, Mat Nayan and Lee (2013) support our argument that the news published in mainstream media is mainly based on the theoretical framework of development media. However, past studies used the term “development news” narrowly. For example, McDaniel (1986) used the existence of political personalities as an indicator of development news, while Sarmiti (2003) considered only the themes of economic, educational, political, and human resource development.

² Executive Editor: Kenny Ee, Assistant Executive Editor: Gordon Kon, News Editors: Adeline Liong, Michael Rogers, Harry Julin, Sub-editors: Asmadi Bujang, Nyuk Lee, Alex and Chief Reporter: Kelvin Tan.

³ Interview with William Chan, Executive Editor of *Utusan Sarawak* on 15th March 2013.

These two perspectives are in contrast with the present study which conceptualises development news in a broader sense. This broader conceptualisation of development is based on the assumption that the Malaysians' outlook is significantly shaped by its socio-economic policy such as the New Economic Policy. This in turn has made the media organisations more likely to subscribe to the idea of development in almost every aspect of the news reports. In support of this argument, a classic study by Molotch and Leister (1974 p. 111) has shown that "the news provides a 'reality' that is the political work by which events are constituted by those who happen to currently hold power". Clearly, the mainstream media in Malaysia need to support the government's effort. Based on the development media framework, events related to the society such as community activities, religious activities and sports which commonly involve political figures are also considered as development news. Therefore, the development news has more categories to encompass all news published in newspapers.

Although research on ethnic news is limited, there are studies looking at the construction of ethnic identity. For example, Ting and Jerome's (2012) analysis of an English-language newspaper in Sarawak endorsed the existence of ethnic representation in the media. However, the use of the word "Malay" as a representation of Sarawak Malays is very insignificant, accounting for only one of the 88 news analysed. Samani and Rahim (1995) hypothesised that the public stereotype of Malay youths as being socially problematic and inclined towards social ills but their findings showed otherwise. Despite the availability of studies on the media portrayal of Malays, less emphasis has been given to development news concerning the Malays. Hence, it is timely to investigate the representation of Sarawak Malays in a local newspaper, particularly one that is not owned by Sarawak Malays to examine the influence of ethnicity on the selection and publication of news.

METHOD

Content analysis has been used not only in communication but also in different field of studies including tourism, and historical geography to investigate past issues documented in the communication media. History as well as communication and journalism are two fields of research that use newspapers the most in the United States of America as sources of archived information (Feeney 2014). There have been studies that capitalise on availability of archival information. For instance, Kim, Kim, and Kim (2013) studied a journal publication over a period of 30 years (1980- 2010) regarding the patterns and trends of tourism events; and Kaid and Johnson (2001) studied TV commercials over 18 years from 1950s to 1960s regarding political verbal styles in the US Presidential Candidate Campaign. Consistent with these two studies, the present inquiry adopts a similar approach.

This study used two editions of a local newspaper, The Sarawak Tribune (TST) and its Sunday Edition (i.e. The Sunday Tribune) published in the year 2000. Publications in this year were chosen as Sarawak experienced rapid development in this period and it is important to analyse the media portrayal of development news for the Sarawak Malays. Development became a significant government agenda in 1992. Since then, the implementation of government-initiated development projects and policies were officially compiled and published in 2000. Hence, the year 2000 marked a significant transition period for more development progress in Sarawak.

In the present study, the news reports from the months of March to December 2000 were content-analysed. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with three TST editors who worked in the organisation in the year 2000.

The development media theory was used as a response to a call to recognise the perspective that reflects the progress and experience of developing countries (Gholam & Sreberry 2014; Wang 2011). The theory emphasises media support of political rulers and their economic development policies. Thus, the theory enables the researchers to develop more categories inclusive of a wide range of development news.

The study focused on the content analysis of news presented on the front page and in the local section. Only news carrying stories about the involvement of Sarawak Malays in the events were selected for analysis. Malay names were used to guide the selection of news. A cross check of the names of the Sarawak Malays in the news was conducted with the journalists and editors of the news organisation to ensure that the actors in the news are of Sarawak Malay origin. Prior to the full analyses, a pilot study was conducted using randomly selected news reports for a period of two months of the year 2000 to formulate and fine-tune the content analysis procedures. As a result, a coding sheet was developed based on the patterns of news. The headlines, the news content, the identified characters of Sarawak Malays in the news and the photos that accompanied the news of the Sarawak Malays were coded using the coding sheet (Table 1). From all the information gathered, the image of the Sarawak Malays was gauged. In this study, image refers to news that suggests positive, negative or neutral portrayal.

Table 1: A sample of coded data

News Headlines	Category of News	Identified Sarawak Malay Characters in the News	Image
“Abim to set up more Taski branches”.	Education	<i>Ustaz</i> (Religious Teacher)	Positive
“3 babies adopted on World Red Cross Day”.	Community Issue	Divisional Health Officer	Positive
“Cpl Dakhlan is Sarikei Police’s top blood donor”.	Community Issue	Police Officer	Positive
“Biggest Jamboree ever held in Sarawak”.	Community Issue	Minister	Neutral
“Contraband fags seized in ambush”.	Crime	Police Officer and the Accused	Positive and Negative

As a result of this process, 18 categories of news were identified: religious activities; economics and business; lifestyle; community activities; entertainment; court and crime news; accidents; careers; art, culture and customs; health; people with disability; tourism; human development; physical development; education; agriculture; politics and sports. These categories were then used in the process of data classification in the study. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were generated to reflect the patterns of the news.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

News Coverage on Sarawak Malays

A total of 14,795 news articles were reported in TST and The Sunday Tribune in the year 2000. Of this total, 2,335 (15.8%) were news stories about the Sarawak Malays. It is interesting to observe that the ratio of news coverage on Sarawak Malays can relatively reflect the Sarawak Malay population which was estimated at about a quarter of the State's population in the year 2000. The breakdowns show that 218 (9.3 %) news on Sarawak Malays appeared on the front page and as many as 2,117 (90.7 %) news appeared in the local section.

The 18 categories of news identified can be ranked from the highest to the lowest as follows: community activities; court and crime news; physical development; human development; education; sports; economics and business; health; religious activities; careers; politics; accidents; art, culture and customs; entertainment; tourism; agriculture; lifestyle and people with disabilities. Development news is ranked third (Figure 1).

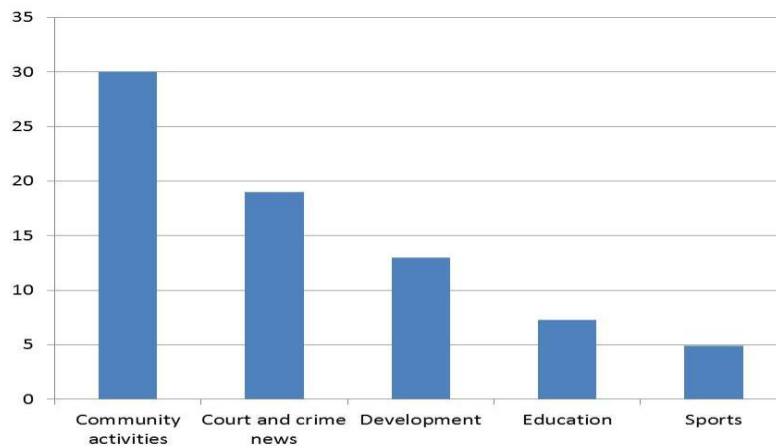


Figure 1: Percentage of top five news categories on Sarawak Malays

Among the 18 categories of news selected, the community activities show the highest percentage of 30.2%. This is followed by court and crime news (19%), development (13%), education (7.3%) and sports (4.9%). The themes associated with the community activities of the Sarawak Malays mostly relate to safety (police force and fire fighters); welfare (health, environment, well-being); club activities (government pensioners, Rela, SABERKAS, alumni); festivals (the celebration of religious festivals such as Eid al-Fitr, the Prophet's birthday and the anniversary of local dignitaries); and contests (organised by government officials and private

entities) (Figure 2).



Figure 2: An example of community activity news

From the findings, it shows that Sarawak Malays valued community activities. At the same time, from the perspective of media agenda, such news is given priority by the editors to promote a harmonious society in Sarawak.

The analysis also revealed a frequent appearance of news sources including dignitaries such as Head of State, politicians, and government officers such as the police officers, fire fighters, hospital staff, as well as educators. This result is consistent with the findings by McDaniel (1986) who found the frequent appearance of politicians and civil servants in the news on development. This illustrates the patriarchal relationship between community members, civil servants and politicians. Moreover, many of the Sarawak Malays middle class hold high positions in the state government and this is a continuation of their involvement in the administration since the colonial times under the Brooke family in Sarawak.

The second most frequent news was on court and crime that comprises 19.8% of the total number of news reports about Sarawak Malays (Figure 3). However, it must be stressed here that the news does not necessarily reflect that the perpetrators were Sarawak Malays. Most of the crime and court cases reported portray the roles of Sarawak Malays as magistrate, lawyers, prosecutors, judges and police officers. These news sources imply that there are Sarawak Malays who are educated and hold important positions in the civil service. Therefore, the reporting of this group is seen to contribute to a positive image of the Sarawak Malays. Nevertheless, there is a small number of the Sarawak Malays who contributed to a negative image in news through their involvement in criminal activities.

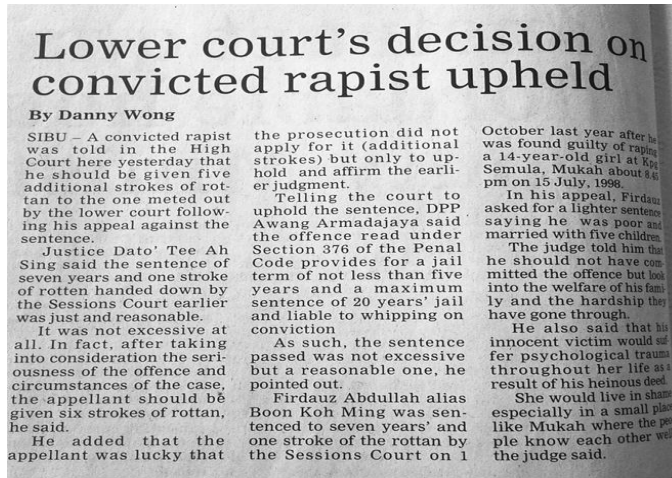


Figure 3: An example of court and crime news that portrays a positive image of the Sarawak Malays. In this case, the Deputy Public Persecutor (DPP), Awang Armadajaya, is a Sarawak Malay

Meanwhile, the news on development activities which ranked third in frequency can be divided into two, namely, physical development and human development (Figure 4). News on physical development included the construction of community halls, schools, bridges and other public facilities while the category of human development comprised activities such as courses, lectures, workshops and career fairs. The percentage of reports on the involvement of the Sarawak Malays in the categories of physical development (6.8%) and human development (5.8 %) are similar. This reflects a balanced development between the two areas. The Sarawak Malays who were involved in the development of soft skills were mostly those who had careers. Their involvement in human development activities reflects a positive image that shows the Sarawak Malays are always trying to move forward.





Figure 4: Two examples of news in the human development and physical development categories.

The education category was ranked as the fourth highest in frequency (7.3%) among 18 new categories on Sarawak Malays in TST and The Sunday Tribune. Most of the news in this category highlighted the success and achievements of the Sarawak Malays mainly in public examinations and the opportunity to pursue higher education (Figure 5). Although ranked fourth highest, the news reporting on education involving the Sarawak Malays is considered relatively low. The education news show the competitiveness of the Sarawak Malays and their involvement in education related activities.



Figure 5: An example of news on education

Finally, sports activities were ranked fifth with only 4.9% out of 14,795 news reports on the Sarawak Malays' involvement in various sports activities (Figure 6). Even though TST had specific sports sections which feature local, national and international sports news, the analysis revealed that this newspaper also reported the involvement of the Sarawak Malays in various community sporting events such as inter-village football matches and telematches. Community sporting events are more appropriately featured in the local section of the newspaper. This is due to the nature of the news which is written in a community-manner rather than sports news per se.

Resident hands over colours to Maksak team

LIMBANG – The Resident, Encik Ubaidillah bin Haji Abdul Latip, yesterday presented the Divisional colours to the volleyball team for Inter-Division Maksak volleyball competition being held in Sarikei today and tomorrow.

The 12-member team, led by Encik Mohd Saiful was selected from various government agencies.

Figure 6: Example of sports news

Editors' Views on News Coverage on Sarawak Malays

To complement the data gathered using the coding sheet, several in-depth interviews with three TST editors who worked in the media organisation in the year 2000. The interviews with editors were conducted to understand how the Melanau-Malay ethnic relations influenced the selection of ethnic news. Agenda setting theory explains that the owner determines the direction and content of the newspaper.

The editors interviewed unanimously agreed that the agenda setting of this media organisation was to support the PBB, a component of the National Front party (Barisan Nasional).

As noted by one of the editors in Excerpt 1 (Editor 3), the focus of the newspaper is development news that portray the government leaders in a good light:

Excerpt 1:

We have always been directed to highlight the development of political news in our newspaper. Reminders were given from time to time by the newspaper owners on this point. The agenda is more focused on news that can boost the state government leaders' reputations and credibility. Development news is good for the government because it indicates that the government leaders are keen to serve the people and see the state develops.

It is important to note that the owners of the TST, despite being Melanaus, had not emphasised the ethnocentric approach to its agenda setting concerning the selection of news to be published.

This point is acknowledged by Editor 2, who is of the opinion that ownership of the TST does not influence the day-to-day running of the newsroom. Every news is selected based on its value. He added that:

Excerpt 2:

Although the owners of this newspaper are Melanaus, there is no specific instructions from the top management to highlight the Melanau leaders in this newspaper. However, it is coincidental that some ministers at that time were Melanaus. So, that is why a lot of news seemed to be highlighting the Melanau leaders which was not the case. The emphasis was to highlight news involving the PBB leaders regardless of their ethnicity.

Editor 1 also shared the same sentiment (as shown in Excerpt 3):

Excerpt 3:

From my experience working in this organisation, I have never received any instructions from my employers to highlight any particular ethnic group in news coverage. Emphasis were always given for us to publish news on development, community activities, education, economic and social unity, which reflects the state's political stability.

From the three excerpts presented, it can be seen that the owners of TST had no agenda in highlighting any specific ethnic group in the news reports. They were more concerned to publicise news on the development of the state. In this respect, TST can be seen as the mouth piece of the government. As pointed out by Editor 3 in Excerpt 4:

Excerpt 4:

"I once overlooked the task of publishing a news about the official opening of a mosque in Santubong (a Malay populated area) by the Chief Minister. The next day, I was reprimanded by the owner of the newspaper on why the news was not published.

The statement is another example that reflects the concern of the owner of the newspaper to include news that involve other ethnic groups, which in this case is the Sarawak Malays. This finding is consistent with Chin (2004) who stated that Taib Mahmud is sensitive to criticism that implies his negligence towards the Sarawak Malays.

CONCLUSION

The study showed that the news coverage of the Sarawak Malays in the TST and The Sunday Tribune encompassed 18 news categories, and the top five most frequent categories of news are: community activities; crime and court news; physical development and human development; education; and sports. The analysis of the news indicated that the Sarawak Malays were

portrayed positively in the news coverage of the newspapers. Obviously, despite being owned by the Melanaus, the TST and The Sunday Tribune gave fair coverage in their news reporting on the Sarawak Malays. At the same time, the findings showed that the newspapers owners complement the government's development agenda by highlighting development issues rather than ethnic-based news. In addition, the framework of development media used in this study offers a comprehensive picture of the development that has taken place in the state through the portrayal of the Sarawak Malays as reported in TST. The news categories developed in this study proved that development reported in the news encompasses a wide spectrum of community activities. Future studies should continue to investigate similar issues in different newspapers by adopting a framework that allows development aspirations to be reflected in a holistic manner.

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