

ELECTION NEWS AND AGENDA SETTING ON FACEBOOK BY MALAYSIAN ENGLISH NEWSPAPERS

Shafizan Mohamed, Kamaruzzaman Abdul Manan & Wan Norshira Wan Ghazali

ABSTRACT

This article explores online news ability to on set the agendas of its readers on Facebook. Due to the decline in printed circulation, most contemporary newspaper organizations have opted to share their content on social media, most specifically, Facebook. By doing this, newspaper organizations are able to reach wider readership as well as facilitate more dynamic user engagements and interactions whereby readers are able to comment, discuss and even share a news piece. Within these dynamic user interactions, lies the potential for extending the agenda setting function of newspapers. On top of that also lies the newspapers' ability to facilitate the readers' opinions on issues. To confirm this relationship between online news, Facebook and public opinion, this article content analyzed reader comments on over 600 news articles from major English newspapers written during the Semenyih and Rantau by-elections in Malaysia. Results of the analysis indicated that while the newspapers and its readers on Facebook do share some issue salience, the relationship does not adopt the traditional agenda-setting dynamic. The ability to communicate on Facebook has allowed the readers to do more than simply receiving news and issues. Instead, they disrupt the often-straightforward public opinion model by influencing how others receive news. Thus, newspapers' contested relationship with the formation of public opinion is a significant change in the role of newspapers as the main agenda setter of political news.

Keywords: Facebook, News, Agenda Setting, Public Opinion, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

According to Al-Rawi (2016), in order to survive the online onslaught over printed media, almost all contemporary news organizations now depend on the social media namely Facebook and Twitter. Because of the decline in printed circulation, these news organizations are selling their news on the social media where a vast amount of audience is available. News are pushed and shared extensively on Facebook especially where readers do more than consume news, they comment and interact with other readers. News organizations in Malaysia are also following this trend. Mainstream newspapers that used to compete for circulation are now competing for followers on Facebook (Mohamed and Idid, 2019). Other than reader interactions, sharing news on Facebook is also preferred by news organizations because it helps protect the newspapers from uncivil and abusive comments on their news websites. This is because Facebook allows for user checking in which the identity of the commenters can be identified. Even in this age of fake accounts and fake users, Facebook offers more accountability as these fake users can easily be identified and usually penalized by other users (Kim, 2018).

Due to the popularity of Facebook as an alternative platform for newspapers and the subsequent reader interactions that emerge in the Facebook comment sections, this new space for public discourse have become an important area for media and communication research.

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

By taking this emerging interest into consideration, this article attempts to contribute to the study of online news; Facebook and public opinion by investigating whether news comments shared on Facebook reflect the sentiments of the readers? And, should these comments be constituted as a form of public opinion? Ksiazek (2018) suggested that news comments could indicate user engagement with the news, as well as offer insight into how users are participating in virtual discussions of current events. The emergence of interactive digital platforms for the provision of news has sparked an interest in capturing the ways that users are engaging, experiencing, and reacting to content.

When users choose to comment on a news story, they are signaling a heightened interest by not only processing and reacting to the news, but by choosing to share their thoughts in a public forum. Therefore, news comments offer the possibility to learn about the effectiveness of news stories in influencing user opinions. The comments users share after reading an article can suggest whether they agree, disagree or are not affected at all by the news. Aggregating the news stories and comparing it with the overall comments can further acknowledge the level of influence news media have over the readers/public opinions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysians online

Malaysia offers an interesting case to study the effect of news on user comments namely because like many other developing nations, Malaysia has a dynamic media industry and a progressive political culture. Malaysia used to be an example of a closed media system where strict government control over news and information as well as public opinions often hamper objective and effective political discourse (Wok & Mohamed 2017). The rise of the online media and the continuous pressure for global openness has rapidly and steadily transformed both the media and political culture in Malaysia. Malaysians are actively challenging the conservative political culture by sharing their political opinions loud and clear online where government control is limited. In 2018, Malaysians overthrew a 61 years old government that had powerful hold over the country's media and political apparatus. The Internet, especially SNS offered Malaysians the avenue to get alternative news and to discuss and contemplate over local politics. It would not be too far-fetched to claim that Facebook is where most of the political discourses take place (Mohamed, Manan and Ghazali, 2019).

Malaysians are generally Facebook savvy. With a population of 31.2 million, the country has some 16 million Facebook users (MCMC 2017). The popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook was made possible by the improved Internet backbone, increase in Internet penetration and overall better utilization of Information Technologies in terms of mobile phones, computers and Internet access (Wok and Mohamed 2017).

A 2018 study on the usage of social networking sites conducted by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) found that Internet usage in Malaysia

increased from 57 % in 2013 to 87.4 % in 2018. The study found that 97.3 % of Internet users owned at least a Facebook account and 53.8 % of them accessed Facebook on a daily basis. The survey by MCMC also found that some 18.3% % of social media users share political views. While the percentage of social media users sharing political views may not be that high, it is still a significant source of information for those who access it (90.1%). 86.9% of those who surveyed identified that social media is one of the main online information portal for them. A study on political engagement among Malaysian voters by Salman et al. (2018) supports the centrality of SNS in Malaysian political discourse. The study found that 63.5% of voters identifies SNS as their main source for political information with 86.5% claiming Facebook as their main SNS platform.

The Semenyih and Rantau By-elections

The Semenyih by-election was held on March 2, 2019 for one of the seats in the Selangor State Legislative Assembly. It is the fourth by-election for the Selangor State Assembly following Sungai Kandis, Balakong, and Seri Setia. The by-election was triggered when the seat became vacant following the death of assemblyman Bakhtiar Mohd Nor on January 11, 2019 from a heart attack. The Semenyih by-election saw a four-cornered fight with Barisan Nasional (BN), Parti Sosialis Malaysia and independent candidate Kuan Chee Heng challenging the incumbent Pakatan Harapan. The by-election became the subject of attention when PAS decided to make way for BN to contest as the latter had bigger support in the constituency. BN's first win in the Cameron Highlands by-election on January 26, 2019 further increased the Semenyih by-election excitement among voters as predictions arose whether or not BN would make its second victory. The by-election has observed that BN wrested back the Semenyih state seat from Pakatan Harapan which held the position for only 9 months following its win in the 14th General Election.

On the other hand, the Rantau by-election was held on April 13, 2019 for the Negeri Sembilan State Legislative Assembly when the seat fell vacant after the Election Court nullified the result of last year's polls. In May 2018, Mohamad Hasan of BN won uncontested in the 14th General Election after Dr. Streram Sinnansamy, the PKR's candidate, was not allowed to enter the nomination centre to file his papers since he did not have a pass issued by the Election Commission (EC). Although Mohamad tried to set aside the Election Court's decision through the Federal Court, his appeal was dismissed. This has given Streram a second chance as PH's candidate to contest against Mohamad and other two independent contestants. Despite this commotion, Mohamad Hasan won as expected based on his solid track record in past elections. Following Semenyih, Rantau was the third by-election won by BN making three losses in total for Malaysia's ruling Pakatan Harapan (PH).

The media plays an important role to inform readers on the current updates on election stories. Likewise, they also shape attitudes, opinions, and influence the political behavior of readers. However, to what extent this is true is contested depending on the situations and context. The media highlights on both by-elections are significant for a study of this kind since they provides lens through which public agenda could be perceived as replications of media agenda or vice versa. The BN first win in Cameron Highlands by-election was a big morale booster for its coalition since being toppled from power in the 14th General Election. This has paved ways to bigger possibility of BN winning the Semenyih and Rantau by-elections seeing voters trust on BN to have been brought back. It is also interesting to observe as to whether or not the PH government is able to gain support from people in rural constituencies despite its wide approval among the metropolitan as reported in media.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of agenda setting offers a way to understand the relationship between news and public opinion. Undeniably, the volume and theoretical richness of research activity on agenda setting have made it one of the most studied concepts in media effect research (McCombs 2005). The concept of agenda setting was innovated by Walter Lippmann (1922) in his famous book, "Public Opinion," where he posited the notion that the media construct public views of the world. McCombs and Shaw coined the term agenda setting in 1972 in their study of the role of the media in the 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina (McQuail, 1994). The theory illustrates that issues important to the mass media will have great importance to the public. McCombs and Shaw stated that the media decides the public agenda by telling people what to think about in an effort to shape political reality. In this sense, not only that readers learn about a particular issue, they also learn how important the issue is through media exposure and positioning (McCombs, 2002). The media manifest power in shaping public opinion is described at two levels. The first level of agenda setting examines the relative salience or importance of issues or subjects. At this level, issues will be picked up by the media for public attention. While in the second level of agenda setting, the emphasis is on the relative salience or importance of the attributes of the issues or subjects.

Agenda setting is not new to the study of political issues in Malaysia. The roles of the news media in telling people of what to think of political figures are indeed crucial especially during election period. According to Yassin and Zanuddin (2012), media reports set media agenda in an effort to influence how people view politicians and political issues. The media representation helps the public in making informed electoral decisions. However, to what extent the media agenda sets the public agenda varies from a case to another. A study by Kee, Salman, Ni, Yaakop, Adisa, and Hoong (2017) attempted to explore the function of agenda setting on English newspapers during the 13th General Election in Malaysia. The study found that although the media agenda in English newspapers assisted the transfer of issue salience and issue attributes to audiences, there were no significant relationship between the English newspapers and the public agenda among the main ethnic groups in Malaysia. For example, even though crime is ranked at the 9th place as the media issue, the public considered the issue as their top agenda.

A similar study was carried out by Manaf, Taibi, and Manan (2017) in exploring the relationship between Malay language newspaper agenda and the Malay public agenda during the 13th General Election. The study discovered that, not only the Malay language newspaper and the public Malay do not share similar issues, both were also differed in terms of issues priority. Manaf et al., (2017) reported that although the media set religion and politics as their main agenda, the public perceived national security more prominently. Another study by Mun and Li (2011) tried to verify agenda setting theory's applicability in public communication research. In this study, issues that were raised by politicians and issues picked up by the media were examined to explore the extent to which the latter corresponds the former. The result reported that issues brought up by political figures were given equal degree of importance in the media. It concluded that agenda setting is present "in the news reporting on the issues raised by politicians on the days leading to the 12 General Election" (p.44). However, the study did not attempt to discover whether the public agenda is replications of the media agenda, rather conclusion was made based on the swing of voters to the opposition party.

Traditional methods of investigating whether news influences public agendas require comprehensive and sometimes complex field study wherein a public opinion survey becomes

the prominent way to identify public sentiments. But with the availability of direct user comments on news, it becomes possible to look at how media users respond to news articles and whether they place the same level of issue salience when compared with the issues covered by the news media. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to identify whether there exist a first-level agenda setting relationship between news media and the readers by comparing and analyzing the issues highlighted by the online newspapers with the issues talked about by the news commenters during the Semenyih and Rantau by-elections. This article tests the ‘first-level’ agenda-setting effects of online news by asking:

1. Do the issues presented by the English Newspapers parallel with the issues talked about by the news commenters on Facebook during the Semenyih and Rantau by-elections campaign weeks?
2. Do the comments section in newspapers’ Facebook pages represent public opinion?

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted during two different by-elections that were conducted in different time periods. To capture the news coverage on the elections, the study focused specifically on the news that were shared during each election’s campaign weeks. In Malaysia, election campaign can only be conducted during the specific time allocated by the Election Commission. For the Semenyih election, the candidates were allowed to officially campaign from March 2nd 2019 to March 16th 2019 and for the Rantau election, the campaign period was from March 30th, 2019 to April 13th, 2019. These two time periods were very appropriate for 1) observing the news coverage of the elections and, 2) comparing the relationship between the issues that were covered by the newspapers with the issues discussed by the newsreaders.

The data presented in this article is part of a bigger study that investigated public opinions during elections. In the main project, data on public opinion is gathered from multiple instruments such as surveys and interviews. For this particular paper, only relevant data from the online content analysis is shared. To answer the research questions, two English newspapers were sampled for each election. Malaysiakini and The Star newspapers were studied in both elections. These newspapers were also selected because they have a very prominent online presence and represented diversity in readership. Malaysiakini is mostly read by the more educated, urban and politically liberal demographic group (Lee, Nayan and Othman 2016) while The Star mostly attracted the more conservative, primarily Non-Malay Middle Class Malaysians (Lee et al. 2016). These variations in the demographic background of the readers were important in capturing a more comprehensive data that signified the majority Malaysians’ political views.

Table1: Descriptions of the Sampled News on User Comments

Newspapers	Total number of news	Total number of top issues (covered by the newspapers)	Total number of comments	Total number of top issues (discussed by commenters)
Semenyih election				
Malaysiakini	150	174	7500	361
The Star	150	147	7500	311
TOTAL	300	321	15000	672

Rantau election				
Malaysiakini	150	154	7500	349
The Star	150	102	7500	293
TOTAL	300	256	15000	642

*The newspapers' number of Facebook followers was recorded on the first day of data collection

Content analysis was used as method to collect the data. This method is commonly used in electoral studies (Idid 2017) especially when looking at news issues coverage during elections. For example, Ahmad and Buyong (2017) content analyzed the political issues covered by local online newspapers during the Malaysian 13th general election (GE13). Likewise, Salman et al. (2018) explored the agenda setting functions of the Malaysian newspapers by using the same methodology. Studies that focused on the use of Facebook during election have also relied on content analysis. Manaf, Taibi and Manan (2017) explored the agenda setting functions of the Malay newspapers in that same election and compared them with the public issues identified through a public opinion survey. On the other hand Zainuddin et al. (2017) content analyzed both the Indian political organization Facebook pages and Indian politicians Facebook account in the attempt to studied the issues concerning the Indian public during the GE13.

The researchers developed a standardized codebook and code sheet to record the data. The codebook describes in details the items and themes included in the study while the code sheet was designed to capture the issues shared by the newspapers and their readers. Four undergraduate coders were employed and were provided with relevant training on how to identify the items and themes from the news and comments. Each coder was assigned with a newspaper and was asked to code the 10 most popular news on the 'PRK Semenyih' and 'PRK Rantau' respectively. Popular in this sense refers to the amount of response an article gathers in terms of the number of comments and shares. This lasted for 15 days. Therefore, each coder worked on 150 piece of news article. Each article could generate up to 3 issues. Since the number of comments on each news article was very big, only the top 50 most relevant comments were coded. On Facebook, most relevant comments are comments that have the most likes and replies. Out of the 50 comments, only the top 5 issues discussed by the commenters were recorded. Therefore, each news article could generate up to 3 media issues and 5 public issues. These issues were then grouped and categorized into 25 main issues that included Politics, Election, Economy, Crimes, Development, Education, International Relations and many more.

The researchers also conducted a mock data collection. The coders were given four news articles and were required to capture the data and transfer the data into the code sheet. The mocked data were then analysed using Holsti's CR (1969) inter-coder reliability to test the trustworthiness of the findings. In general, the test result shown that all variable is above the minimum reliability value which is 0.7. All the data were recorded and analysed using the statistical software IBM SPSS software.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

As indicated above, this study adopts an agenda-setting approach towards understanding the relationship between news and user comments in the Facebook pages of Malay newspapers during two state by-elections. Results from the content analysis conducted showed that there is a relationship between the issues highlighted by the newspapers with the issues talked about by the news commenters. However this relationship is not as linear and as direct as

proposed by the traditional agenda setting relationship. The study identified more than 25 main issues discussed by the newspapers and the news commenters during the campaign weeks. The issues included Politics, Election, Economy, Crimes, Development, Education, International Relations and many more. Each of these main issues is generic and is an umbrella to a variety of related sub-issues. For example, issues such as corruption, human trafficking and counterfeits are categorized under Crimes. The study also found different set issues were discussed during the two elections. The table below describes the 12 most popular main issues discussed by the newspapers and the commenters in the two elections.

Table 2: Description Of The 12 Most Popular Issues

No	Main Issue	Description
1.	Politics	Issues relating to the political system, the strengths and weaknesses of the political parties and the behaviour of the politicians
2.	BN Administration	Issues reflecting on the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the previous Barisan Nasional government
3.	Economy	Issues relating to Malaysia's finances such as recession, inflation, poverty, tax, exchange rates and cost of living
4.	Election/Campaign	Issues relating to the election including the candidates' campaign activities such as manifestos and election speeches and promises
5.	Leadership	Issues relating to the leadership in the government and the political parties
6.	PH Administration	Issues relating to the effectiveness of Pakatan Harapan government's manifestos, policies and actions
7.	Local Issues	Issues concerning the voters in Semenyih such as infrastructure and development
8.	Najib Razak	Issues pertaining the conducts and misconducts of the former Prime Minister Najib Razak. This includes the corruption charges against him as well as his very popular 'Bossku' political campaign
9.	Malay-Islam	Issues involving the Malay privileges and Islam as the country's official religion
10.	Unity	Issues relating to the conflicts around racial integration between the different ethnic groups
11.	Development	Issues revolving around the physical and modern development of the country such as infrastructures, buildings and transportation
12.	Education	Issues relating to Malaysia's education system such as the different categories of schools such as public, private, religious, vernacular and many more

In order to identify the issue salience, only the top 8 issues will be discussed. This is because 8 issues are enough to show the required patterns of news reports and user comments required by the study. Thus the results below will show the 8 most popular issues written about in the news being compared to the 8 most popular issues written about by the news commenters in each of the by elections.

Findings 1: The issues highlighted by both the english newspapers and the commenters during the semenyih by-election

Table 3 lists the top 8 most popular issues written in the newspapers and the top 8 issues commented about by the newsreaders during the Semenyih election. Although the ranking of the issues differed between the newspapers, the differences were minor, as the newspapers tend to focus on the same issues. At the same time, the news commenters also discussed similar issues but the salience given to the issues largely differed from the newspapers' issue salience.

Table 3: Comparison of the top 8 issues highlighted by the English newspaper and the news commenters during the Semenyih By-election

Issues Highlighted by English Newspapers				Issues Highlighted by the Commenters			
Issues	Malaysia Kini	The Star	Total	Issues	Malaysia Kini	The Star	Total
Election/Campaign	47 (28%)	41 (30%)	88 (29%)	Politics	74 (22%)	70 (25%)	144 (24%)
Leadership	28 (17%)	21 (14%)	55 (18%)	Leadership	69 (21%)	62 (22%)	131 (21%)
Politics	31 (19%)	19 (6%)	50 (16%)	Najib Razak	44 (13%)	35 (13%)	79 (14%)
Najib Razak	13 (8%)	9 (6%)	22 (7%)	Economy	33 (10%)	29 (10%)	62 (11%)
PH Admin	13 (8%)	8 (6%)	21 (7%)	PH Admin	33 (10%)	20 (7%)	53 (9%)
Economy	10 (6%)	8 (6%)	18 (6%)	Election/Campaign	25 (8%)	20 (7%)	45 (7%)
Local Issues	6 (4%)	9 (6%)	15 (5%)	Unity	18 (5%)	9 (3%)	27 (4%)
Unity	9 (5%)	5 (4%)	14 (5%)	Malay Islam	16 (5%)	11 (4%)	27 (4%)
Development	4 (2%)	7 (5%)	11 (4%)	Development	16 (5%)	11 (4%)	27 (4%)
Malay-Islam	5 (3%)	5 (4%)	10 (3%)	Local Issues	4 (1%)	14 (5%)	18 (2%)
Total	166 (100%)	138 (100%)	304 (100%)		332 (100%)	281 (100%)	614 (100%)

Because the study was specifically conducted during the campaign weeks running up to the election, it is justifiable that both newspapers wrote the most about the election and campaign stories. The election/campaign issues made up 29% of all the news covered during the election. The newspapers also wrote significantly about politics (18%) and leadership (16%). On the other hand, while the top 8 issues commented about by the newsreaders mirrored the issues shared by the newspapers, the salience or the importance given to the issues varied. While the newspapers focused significantly on Election/Campaign, the commenters were giving more weight to political issues. The public did not seem to be as interested in Election issues as it is ranked the sixth most salient issue. Only 7% of the comments made were about the election. This might be because news on election campaigns is mostly reporting of events and although it received large coverage it was not interesting enough for the reader to comment about.

Politics was the most popular issues discussed by commenters of both newspapers (24%). Political issues are popular mainly due to the complex and sometimes instable political climate that had evolved in Malaysia post GE-14. Since it was the first time Malaysia had ever experienced a government change, all those involved including the politicians, the government and the people were still adjusting to the new political status quo. The new PH government is still learning on how to administer a country while coordinating within its own loosely tied component parties that have different ideals and work ethics. The Barisan Nasional on the other hand, is still reeling over its lost and trying to salvage whatever political influence it still has. In the aftermath of its lost in GE14, BN was faced with internal conflicts in which some of its coalition parties and members have chosen to leave and even join the PH government. At the same time, several of its top leaders are currently facing legal

charges for many different reasons. To ensure its survival, Barisan Nasional or UMNO especially has moved towards building a strong relationship with PAS. PAS is the Islamist party that has a significant support among the Malays. An UMNO-PAS partnership can mobilize the support of the majority Malay voters. These constant and rapid political changes affected the public who are also trying to come to terms with the new political climate. The commenters were equally interested in these political issues and responded to them as well referring to them when commenting on other issues. Therefore it appears that stories with dramaturgical values appeal most to the newspapers and its readers.

The newspapers and the commenters agreed on the importance of leadership issues as both prominently discussed about it, making leadership the second most important issues by the newspapers (18%) and the commenters (21%). Both the newspapers and the commenters also agreed on the level of importance given to issues relating to the Pakatan Harapan government and issues about development. News and comments on the PH government's administration was similarly placed at the fifth place by the newspapers (7%) and the commenters (9%) while issues of development was placed as the 7th most important. Other issues that attracted both the newspapers and the news readers were Economy, Local Issues and Malay-Islam.

The Malay-Islam issue is unique to the Semenyih by-election as it captured the shift in Malaysia's political agenda. In the wake of the change in of the federal government, there was an increasing apprehension among the Malays that their special status as bumiputera or the 'owners of the land' is being challenged by the more liberal and PH government. The Malay-Islam issue became more prominent after it was used by UMNO-PAS when explaining their political partnership that had gone stronger post GE-14. UMNO-PAS had used the Malay-Islam narrative to gain support from the Malays. The two largest Malay parties used to be traditional foes but have recently been coordinating as a united opposition front. Among the issues played on by these parties were the threats brought by Pakatan Harapan's supposed liberal stance against the Malay privilege and the role of Islam as the official religion. While it is presumed that majority of the readers of the English newspapers were the non-Malays and also the more affluent, liberal and educated Malay upper-class who may be more detached from the Malay-Islam agenda, it appeared that they were still interested to acknowledge about the issue. 5% of the Malaysiakini readers and 4% of readers of TheStar referred to the issue in their comments. In relation to the racially charged Malay-Islam agenda, the newspapers and the readers also discussed about issues relating to unity. Unity in this context refers primarily on the racial integration between the different ethnic groups that make up Malaysia. Unity was the eight (5%) and seventh (4%) most important issue highlighted by the newspapers and the readers respectively.

Najib Razak is prominent among the newspapers and the commenters. However, he is more popular among the commenters than with the newspapers. Najib Razak was the fourth most covered issue in the newspapers (7%) and the third (14%) most popular topic among the commenters. This showed that the newspapers were featuring stories on Najib primarily because he was able to attract a big crowd whenever he came down to Semenyih to campaign for Barisan Nasional. Najib had also made several jabs against the PH government and its leaders through out the campaign week. Among others, he remarked on the PH's government multiple retraction and cancellation of its own policies and programs. While there was still a significant amount of condemnation against him, there was also an increasingly positive impression on Najib mainly among commenters who were critical of the PH government.

Findings 2: The issues highlighted by both the English newspapers and the commenters during the Rantau by-election

Table 4 shows the top 8 issues highlighted by both the newspapers and the newsreaders during the Rantau by-election. Just like during the Semenyih election, the English newspapers and their readers highlighted similar issues. However, the rank of importance given to these issues differed notably.

Table 4: Comparison of the top 8 issues highlighted by the English newspapers and the news commenters during the Rantau By-election

Issues Highlighted by English Newspapers				Top Issues Highlighted by Commenters			
Issues	Malaysia Kini	The Star	Total	Issues	Malaysia Kini	The Star	Total
Election	40 (28%)	32 (32%)	72 (30%)	Leadership	83 (25%)	59 (32%)	142 (27%)
Leadership	37 (26%)	34 (35%)	71 (29%)	Politics	81 (25%)	44 (24%)	125 (24%)
Politics	22 (15%)	12 (12%)	34 (14%)	PH Admin	44 (14%)	27 (14%)	71 (14%)
PH Admin	11 (8%)	3 (3%)	14 (6%)	Election	29 (9%)	24 (13%)	53 (10%)
Development	7 (5%)	6 (6%)	13 (6%)	Unity	24 (7%)	10 (5%)	34 (7%)
Local Issues	7 (5%)	2 (2%)	9 (4%)	BN Admin	24 (7%)	5 (3%)	29 (6%)
Economy	7 (5%)	1 (1%)	8 (3%)	Malay-Islam	19 (6%)	6 (3%)	25 (5%)
Unity	4 (3%)	4 (4%)	8 (3%)	Development	11 (6%)	10 (5%)	21 (4%)
BN Admin	6 (4%)	2 (2%)	8 (3%)	Economy	11 (3%)	2 (1%)	13 (2%)
Education	2 (1%)	3 (3%)	5 (2%)	Education	6 (3%)	0 (0%)	6 (1%)
TOTAL	99 (100%)	143 (100%)	242 (100%)	TOTAL	332 (100%)	187 (100%)	519 (100%)

As per normal practice during election times (Sani, 2014), the newspapers were largely covering on political and election news. In fact, almost half of the news covered by the English newspapers at the time were on Politics (30%) and Election (14%). The newsreaders seemed to agree by commenting significantly on both issues as well. Politics (24%) and Election (10%) were the second and fourth most prominent issues among the commenters. Among the prominent political issue that arose during the Rantau election was the lack of support for PKR; the party representing the Pakatan Harapan government in the election; was getting from its counterparts from the PH coalition resulting in the newspapers and the public to speculate that there is a crisis and lack of agreement among the parties in the PH coalition. Again, dramaturgical stories appeal to the newspapers and its readers.

However, it is interesting to discover that during the Rantau election, the newsreaders placed the highest importance (27%) on the leadership issues. Both the newsreaders of Malaysiakini (25%) and TheStar (32%) commented significantly on leadership. The commenters were mostly critical of the current leadership. They expressed concerns about the abilities of the current PH ministers as well as criticizing the credibility of the previous BN

ministers. At the same time, they were also commenting significantly about the legacy of Rantau's incumbent assemblyman, Datuk Mohamad Hassan who was incidentally also the vice president of UMNO.

An interesting development that occurred during the Rantau election was the resurgence of Barisan Nasional among the newsreaders. 'BN Administration' was more popular among the commenters than with the newspapers. While it was only the ninth most popular issue in the newspapers (3%), it was number six among the issues talked about by the commenters (6%). Although the comments were both appreciative and depreciative of the failed political coalition, it was apparent that it was still relevant to Malaysians in general. This showed that the commenters were still comparing the PH government with the previous BN government. While the comments were not entirely positive, it does indicate that the Barisan Nasional is very still much relevant to the commenters. This could be attributed to the Barisan Nasional's strong victories in the previous by elections in Semenyih and Cameron Highland as well as its united show where its components UMNO (United Malay National Organization), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) were seen to be campaigning together where else, Pakatan Harapan coalition parties did not appear to supporting one another.

Despite the emerging popularity of Barisan Nasional, interest on the Pakatan Harapan administration was still significant. 6% of the news coverage on the election was still focused on the new elected government while the commenters were still actively discussing about the PH coalition making it the third most popular topic (14%) among the commenters. The newspapers also covered on local issues (4%) but it appears that the readers did not catch on its importance as it did not make it into the 10 most popular issues commented about. This may be due to the fact that the news readers are probably made of general Malaysians who are not specifically voters of Rantau and therefore they did not find interest in discussing about local issues. This could signal the impact of social media on elections because it would mean that even in local elections, national issues would dominate over issues that are more relevant to the local voters. Therefore, in the attempt to look at public sentiments in social media it would be essential to acknowledge that online commenters are not the locals that will be casting the vote. Therefore, they may not be able to offer a strong indication of voting behavior as a locally focused survey would. However, it is also crucial to consider that while these commenters may not be directly voting in the election, they are contributing to the political climate by asserting importance on issues that may not be significantly covered by the media.

As if a continuation from the Semenyih election, the Malay-Islam issue remained prominent among the news commenters during Rantau by-election. Although the newspapers no longer find the issues prominent, it was the seventh most prominent issue highlighted by the news commenters (5%). This is an interesting find as it challenges the theoretical assumptions of Agenda setting that predicts a transfer of issue salience from the newspapers to its readers. Therefore there is a fracture in the role of newspapers as curators of public opinion. This meant that while reading the news, the readers were also relating to issues that were not highlighted in the news they read. This brings into question the role of other factors that undermine the function of the news as agenda setters.

Both newspapers and newsreaders slightly agree on the issue of economy. It is placed by as the seventh most salient issue by the newspapers (3%) and the newsreaders (2%). The commenters were especially concerned about the continued rising cost of living. They were also apprehensive about Pakatan Harapan's strict handling of the economy where many projects proposed by the previous government had been cancelled and postponed. The PH's

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

Unlike in the Semenyih election, Najib Razak appeared to have less impact in the Rantau election as he was absent in the top 10 most popular news coverage and topic of discussion among the commenters. This could be attributed to the prominent role played by the BN candidate, Datuk Mat Hassan who is a prolific political figure on his own. It could be that because of his influence and ability to win the election, Najib Razak did not have to campaign as much as he did during Semenyih. Another unique finding is the agreement between the newspapers and the commenters on education. While education did not appear as an important issue during the Semenyih by-election, it is the tenth most popular issues for both the newspapers (2%) and its readers (1%). Although the amount of attention given to this issue is relatively low, it is still prominent as when compared to the many other issues that did not make it into the top 10. Education was mostly discussed in the Rantau election because of how Rantau was planned by the previous BN government to become one of the country's educational hubs with the building of new schools and universities. The BN candidate had further reaffirm his desire to continue with the plan.

CONCLUSION

The results above showed that while both the newspapers and their readers did focus on similar issues, the salience given to those issues vary. This challenges the traditional agenda-setting proposition that highlights the powerful role of newspapers in influencing the readers' agenda. It used to be that not only can newspapers tell the people 'what to think', it could also tell the people 'what to think about'. But new developments revolving around the interactive and asymmetric nature of online media have increased the influence of other peoples' opinions in determining how readers consume and make sense of issues. This brings into question the roles of news organizations that are often acknowledged as social institutions 'that produce and communicate statements about reality on a regular basis' (Ekström, 2002: 274). As agenda setters, news media provides the public with the information that helps the public understand the opinion climate around them (Hoffman, 2012).

Therefore this article proposes that contemporary development in the role of news media in determining public opinion needs to be re-evaluated. Instead of claiming to be agenda setters, news media should now be considered as 'discourse centers' (Mohamed and Idid, 2019) that informs readers about issues while at the same time offering a platform where readers can discuss and evaluate the issues with other readers and commenters. As 'discourse centers' news media can uphold the liberal understanding of media's role as the 'marketplace of ideas' where the public is not just informed and influenced by the news content but also by the ideas brought upon by other commenters. As such, even a straightforward news piece could trigger discussions about many different things.

Thus it is also vital to acknowledge that the influence of social media, more specifically Facebook, on the development of news media is undeniable. Not only has it provided a new platform for news to be distributed and commercialized, it has also changed the dynamics of news media influence. In a nutshell, the dynamic interactions that occur among the newspaper readers in the news site's Facebook comment sections are indications of public opinion. These comments go beyond public expression as it has the potential to also

influence the agenda setting process. Hence, it is worthwhile for future research to analyze the commenters' sentiments and how they influence and set the public agenda. Scholarly research needs to recognize the changing nature of online opinions and this calls for more sophisticated methods that can strategically discern how ideas and opinions travel and morph through online networks.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

SHAFIZAN BT. MOHAMED

International Islamic University Malaysia
shafizan@iium.edu.my

KAMARUZZAMAN ABDUL MANAN

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris
kamaruzzaman@fbk.upsi.edu.my

WAN NORSHIRA WAN MOHD GHAZALI

International Islamic University Malaysia
wnorshira@iium.edu.my