

A STUDY ON THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN NEWSROOMS AND GOVERNMENT POLICIES UNDER DATO' SRI MOHD NAJIB'S ADMINISTRATION: A COMPARISON BETWEEN RTM AND ASTROAWANI

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Abstract

Most journalism is not about facts but about the interpretation of what seem to be facts. In recent years, the interpretation, influence and pervasiveness of the news from different media organisation are beyond doubt. Yet there are still disagreements and conflicting views about just how the public is influenced by the media in general by the news written by the journalist in particular and the stories produced by the editors specifically. Journalism is often called the news business – the gathering, the processing and delivery of important and interesting information and further developments or follow-up stories by newspapers and broadcast media or vice versa – is inextricably entangled in that giant, whirling entity often referred to as the media. Story selection is a decision-making and choice-making process but a hurried one. As a result, the considerations must be quickly and easily applicable so that choices can be made without too much deliberation. Notable editors, chief editors and group editors gave in-depth interviews on their decision making process and issues of internal and external forces that 'dampen' the process of nation building in shaping the trajectory of the news, hence, sustaining a potentially transformative public sphere in tandem with the prime minister's elaborate government policies.

Keywords: *decision making; internal forces; external forces; transformative public sphere; government policies*

KAJIAN MENGENAI PROSES BUAT KEPUTUSAN DI BILIK BERITA DAN POLISI KERAJAAN DI BAWAH PENTADBIRAN DATO' SRI MOHD NAJIB: PERBANDINGAN ANTARA RTM DAN ASTROAWANI

Abstrak

Kewartawanan dilihat bukan sekadar fakta tetapi interpretasi apa yang dianggap fakta. Tahun-tahun kebelakangan ini, tafsiran, pengaruh dan kekerapan berita dari pelbagai organisasi media yang berbeza memang tidak dapat dinafikan. Namun masih terdapat perbezaan pendapat dan pandangan yang bercanggah tentang betapa ramai rakyat yang dipengaruhi oleh media secara umum. Tidak kiralah sama ada berita yang ditulis oleh wartawan secara umum atau berita-berita yang dihasilkan oleh editor secara khusus. Kewartawanan sering digelar 'news business' – pengumpulan berita, pemprosesan dan penghantaran maklumat penting dan menarik serta perkembangan lanjut atau berita susulan (follow-up stories) oleh akhbar-akhbar tempatan dan media penyiaran atau sebaliknya – adalah berhubungkait dan terikat dengan entiti yang besar dan sering bergerak pantas yang dikenali sebagai media. Pemilihan berita adalah proses buatputusan dan proses pemilihan yang seringkali dibuat secara tergesa-gesa. Hasilnya, pertimbangan perlu dilakukan dengan cepat dan mudah supaya pilihan boleh dibuat tanpa perbincangan yang lama. Editor, Ketua Editor dan Editor Kumpulan ternama telah memberi temubual mendalam mengenai proses buatputusan dan isu-isu dalaman dan luaran yang menyukarkan proses membina kenegaraan dalam membentuk trajektori berita. Ini adalah penting untuk mengekalkan transformasi sfera awam selaras dengan dasar-dasar kerajaan yang perlu dihuraikan.

Keywords: *buatputusan; isu dalaman; isu luaran; transformasi sfera awam; dasar-dasar kerajaan.*

Introduction

Most journalism is not about facts but about the interpretation of what seem to be facts (Walter Lippmann 1922). This statement is true as we rely on news media especially in times of crisis. A good example was during the September 11, 2001 disaster where journalists responded quickly and professionally. The horrifying details of the terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade center and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. was conveyed rapidly to a global audience in print, the Internet, by radio and by vivid color in television. Virtually the same horrific footages were seen and shocking reports were heard as in the States. Although the news media in Malaysia may seem lacking in coercive power as they cannot literally draft journalists to war torn nations or do coverage on crisis nations but this has changed considerably in recent years. Their influence and pervasiveness are beyond doubt. Yet there are still disagreements and conflicting views about just how the public is influenced by the media in general by the news written by the journalist in particular and the stories produced by the editors specifically.

Journalism is often called the news business – the gathering, the processing and delivery of important and interesting information and further developments or follow-up stories by newspapers and broadcast media or vice versa – is inextricably entangled in that giant, whirling entity often referred to as the media (Hachten, 2005). And when the gathering process is complete or semi complete, the stories goes through a process known as story selection done by the editors or gatekeepers.

This paper looks at the terrains within the landscape of the nation's broadcasting houses whose main business is news. This is not an exhaustive study on the selected broadcasting houses used for comparison, namely Radio Television Malaysia (henceforth RTM) and AstroAwani (henceforth Awani). The paper is generally concerned with the decision making process in the newsroom; taking into consideration the internal and external factors that 'dampen' the process of nation building both in shaping the trajectory of the news, hence, sustaining a potentially transformative public sphere. It also takes stock of the current prime minister's elaborate government policies and have peek at how the newsrooms work in tandem with those projected policies.

Identifying the 'News'

Story selection is a decision-making and choice-making process but a hurried one. As a result, the considerations must be quickly and easily applicable so that choices can be made without too much deliberation (Gans, 1980). Story selection for broadcast news in Malaysia depends on a few considerations and the suitability of the stories for the day's transmission. It has always been a policy in newsrooms to carry news of the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in the first block of the news bulletin regardless whether it is a 30 minute or an

hour's bulletin. The rest of the news bulletin will follow the line-up in terms of importance and news worthiness. The build-up of the line-up has been described by editors as a 'train' where the main stories act as the head of the locomotive while the other stories hook-up and make the rest of the bulletin. This would generally be the main news, business news, foreign news, sports news and the closing.

Other considerations include either adding stories or dropping them depending on the latest breaking news. According to Gans (1980) this consideration must also be easily rationalized so one story is replaced by another and an acceptable reason for doing so is always at hand. These considerations are also designed with the efficiency so as to guarantee the necessary supply of suitable news with the least amount of time, effort and if possible expenditure. Gans (1980) further describes "the news" as the picture of America as nation and society that appears in the national news media. The same definition can be used for the Malaysian scenario of news.

Issues of Practice: A Quick Peek

This study looks at the operations and the decision making process of the newsrooms of the two main broadcasting houses in Malaysia, namely RTM and AstroAwani under the reign of the present Prime Minister Dato Sri Mohd Najib Tun Haji Abdul Razak. Born July 23, 1953 Najib is the sixth and current Prime Minister of Malaysia. He previously held the post of Deputy Prime Minister from January 7, 2004 until he succeeded Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as Prime Minister. Najib is President of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the son of Malaysia's second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak. Najib entered office with a focus on domestic economic issues and political reform.

Malaysia's pliant mainstream media dutifully hailed the benevolence of its new boss. "Najib Gives Hope to Ordinary Folk" ran in a column in the *New Straits Times* after Najib marked his 100 day in office with 10 policies. His policies include:

- a. a viable government
- b. becoming a developed nation
- c. public sector transformation
- d. integrity of civil servants
- e. spurring economic stability
- f. creativity and innovation in stimulating the economy
- g. independence and national integration
- h. 1Malaysia concept
- i. Malaysia and ASEAN
- j. Malaysia and international issues

It is important and interesting to see which of these policies will be picked up by the newsroom operators.

Background of Selected Media Organisations

The two media organisations that are studied in this paper are RTM and Astro. We simply cannot dwell further into this research without taking a look at the background of these organisations and more importantly the question of ownership as it is obviously an effective way to affirm control over any entity including media establishment.

Radio Television Malaysia (RTM)

Radio Television Malaysia or better known as RTM is a government owned television network. It broadcasts from its headquarters in Angkasapuri, Kuala Lumpur. RTM owns and operates a number of radio and television stations. At present, it runs 6 national, 2 international, 17 states, 11 district radio stations and 2 television channels – TV 1 and TV 2 (RTM, 2010). When it started transmission on 1st April 1946, RTM was established as Radio Malaya operating out of Singapore. On 31st August 1957 when Malaya received its independence, Radio Malaya was split into two with the original studios in Singapore taken over by a new station called Radio Singapura while Radio Malaya moved to Kuala Lumpur going on air from the new location on 1st January 1959 (RTM, 2010).

Radio Malaya was later named Radio Malaysia on 16th September 1963 with its signature transmission trademark words *Inilah Radio Malaysia* (This is Radio Malaysia). Services rendered under Malaysia Television (Malaysia TV) started on 28th December 1963 in the Klang Valley and Selangor. The 10month old Television Singapura which was launched on 16th February 1963 became part of Malaysia Television till 1965 when Singapore broke away from Malaysia (Penyiaran, 1987). Radio Malaysia later became Rangkaian National (National Channel) on 1st January 1971 and became the nation's first 24 hour radio station. In 1978 Rangkaian Satu (Network One) was renamed Malaysia Television Satu. A year later Rangkaian Dua was renamed Malaysia Television Dua. New separate logos for both networks were launched the same year. The following year, Malaysian Televisyen and Radio Malaysia merged to become Radio Television Malaysia, RTM (Penyiaran, 1987).

As of 2007, RTM controlled 17 per cent of television viewing market in the country behind Media Prima with 54 per cent and Astro with 29 per cent. But of late neither RTM or Astro has made the top 20 television programmes (AC Nielson, 2011).

Astro

Astro is the brand name of the Malaysian direct broadcast satellite pay television service. It transmits digital satellite television and radio to households in Malaysia and Brunei. Astro is an acronym for All-Asian Satellite Television and Radio Operator. Astro is owned and operated by MEASAT Broadcast Network Systems,

a wholly-owned subsidiary of Astro All Asia Networks plc. This company was de-listed from the Main Market of Bursa Malaysia Securities Berhad on 14 June 2010, following a successful take-over offer by Astro Holdings SdnBhd, a company owned by Tegas Sdn Bhd and its affiliates and Khazanah Nasional Berhad. It has operations at All Asia Broadcast Centre located in Bukit Jalil, Kuala Lumpur and MEASAT in Cyberjaya (Astro, 2011).

Another reputed close associate of former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir, is tycoon Tan Sri Ananda Krishnan, who was issued a license in 1995 to operate MEASAT. MEASAT in turn launched ASTRO, Malaysia's digital direct broadcast satellite service. Krishnan is a long-time member of the board of the Bank Negara and operates Malaysia's "Sports Toto" (owned by Berjaya Group currently). He is also estimated with a net worth of over US\$7.4 billion. Malaysia's privately owned FM stations exhibit similar ownership patterns as television, and is largely controlled by Ananda Krishnan. Five of the seven stations are owned by Airtime Management and Programming Sdn. Bhd. (AMP). AMP additionally operates four "FM" services that are available only via digital direct broadcast satellite (ASTRO). AMP is also a division of Krishnan's ASTRO. Not to forget, Ananda Krishnan also has control over the telecommunication company Binariang Bhd. that owns two satellites Measat-1, Measat-2 and now Maxis Communications Berhad (S) (Shriver, 2003). After the launch of the MEASAT-1 satellite as part of Malaysia's commercialization of space, Astro commenced broadcasting in 1996 with an initial bouquet of twenty-two television and eight radio channels, which were its own channels (Astro All Asia Networks, 2011).

Recent Studies

Although there has been an explosion of scholarly interest in journalistic ethics during recent decades and much of the resulting literature describes the ethics, values, responsibilities, stress levels or roles of particular types of journalists, almost no work has assessed the decision making process in the newsrooms with regards to ownership and government policies. In the many literature reviewed, researchers have done portions of this study in different research projects. This paper is an attempt by this researcher to consolidate those parts to fill the gaps of this research.

In a recent study, Henningsen & Henningsen (2007) defined two features of the decision-making process. Although the decision making process was not done in the newsroom per se, the researchers came up with two important factors. First, group members should recognize that the information is missing. That is to say, group members should be able to identify certain items of decision-relevant information that were unavailable to them. Second, missing information should carry no weight in the final decision. Ignoring information indicates that groups choose to make a decision using a diminished information set.

Faridah (1995) quoting Herbert Simon (1965) on the same aspect that argues that organisations can never be perfectly rational because their members have a

limited capacity to obtain and process information. In her findings, it is clear that firstly, the management makes decisions in the newsroom while the second, the management consults journalists but makes the final decision nevertheless. The ideal state according to the researcher is where the journalist has greater autonomy in decision making but this rarely happens in the Malaysian newsroom scenario. However, decisions regarding the length of the story, news suggestions, editing and rewriting the news, postponing a story, visual suggestions and long range news plans involve some consultations by management with the journalists, even though the final say are in the hands of the management.

In terms of production decision making, Mossig (2004) and Walle (2007), examines two aspects in order to obtain a deeper understanding of how localized production networks arise and how they function but with different findings. Mossig looked at first, the role of the founding of new firms within localized production network was analyzed in detail and second, the decision structures within the production network. At the first level of decision-making the TV station is the main authority compared to the TV production company. At the second level, the TV production company decides on the filling of the subsequent key positions, while the TV station participates in this procedure in an observatory way. At the third level, the TV station is no longer involved in decisions. The main decision-making powers lie with those in the key positions, and the TV production company merely monitors these procedures.

Walle (2007) on the other hand sights a conventional wisdom which draws attention away from the need for diversity in programming. Although it is a popular model for globalization market and a paradigm which in recent years has become the darling of international advertising professionals, its theory of cultural evolution which states (rightly or wrongly) that technology and mass communications are creating a worldwide cultural homogeneity. In his research, Walle also discusses ratings. Ratings were and will always be a major concern of network executives who had advertisers to satisfy. Media executives, however, began to suspect that the low ratings on one show could affect viewership on other programmes on the same channel or network.

Another aspect of this study is about the ownership and how it effects the decision making process of the newsrooms. Napoli, Philip & Zhaoxu Yan (2007), takes stock of this issue in their research when they examine the relationship between television station ownership characteristics and local news and public affairs programming through an expanded analysis of data from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC's) study of Big Four broadcast network affiliates. The results indicate that the FCC's conclusion is that network-owned and operated stations provide more local news and public affairs programming than other affiliates, and that stations with newspaper holdings provide more local news and public affairs programming than stations without newspaper holdings up only when these two program types are analyzed in combination. When these two program types are analyzed independently and when additional

explanatory factors are taken into consideration, these ownership characteristics are positively related to news programming, but not to public affairs programming. The researcher's findings reveal that while financial resources and competition provided stations with greater incentives to produce local news programming, several factors related to station ownership did not. In terms of the quantity of local news provided, once the decision to provide any news was reached, none of the ownership variables were positively related to the quantity of news programming provided.

On the local frontier, Zaharom Nain & Mustafa K. Anuar (1998) in their research on ownership and control of the Malaysian media discusses the history of the mainstream press and broadcasting in Malaysia which has been one stringent political, legal and more recently, economic controlled. From the emergence of the first newspaper, *The Prince of Wales Gazette*, in 1806, the introduction of state-run television, RTM in 1963, the emergence of commercial television, TV3, in 1984, and the launching of Malaysia's first broadcast satellite, Measat 1, in 1996, the state's role in the overall scheme of things has been central. They conclude that there are many stark realities of the Malaysian mainstream media and the low level it has reached in terms of ownership. First, by and large and for a long, long time now, the Malaysian mainstream media have never aspired to be the guardians of freedom of speech.

Very few would argue with the observation that, thus far, the mainstream Malaysian media have been nothing more than government mouthpieces. The trial by media of the sacked Anwar is indicative of this. Second, and in relation to the first point, despite all the talk about 'democracy ala Malaysia', 'freedom with responsibility', ad nauseam, we need to remind ourselves that all of the major Malaysian media organizations - including RTM, TV3, MegaTV, MetroVision, NTV7, Astro, *Berita Harian*, *Utusan Malaysia*, *New Straits Times* and *The Star* - are owned and controlled by BN parties or those closely associated with these parties. To a large extent, this allocative control helps to explain why these media organizations rarely - if ever - break ranks. Third, to reinforce such economic controls further, Barisan has a slew of laws at its disposal - the *Printing Presses and Publications Act*, the *Broadcasting Act*, the *Control of Imported Publications Act*, the *Internal Security Act*, the *Official Secrets Act*, the *Sedition Act* and the *Defamation Act* just to name a few - to control the media.

Theories of Story Selection

Gans (1980) in his research suggests that there are five theories of story selection that can be used to better understand how the news bulletin is prepared. The news desk receives more than 200 assignments a day for a 30 minute or an hour news bulletin depending on which television station. Having limited air time, editors must select a fraction of all these assignments to make up the bulletin. More importantly according to Gans, they cannot decide anew every day or week how to select the fraction that will appear on the news, instead, they

must routinize their task in order to make it manageable.

This paper takes these theories to task with the subjects of the study:

- a. **Journalist-centered** - It argues that it is shaped by the professional news judgment of journalist. Many politicians hold a somewhat similar view. Judging the news by its implications for their political careers, they blame journalistic bias when the news is not favorable or hurts them.
- b. **Routine-centered** - A theory favored by social-science studies, locates the routinization in the news organization and shows how story selection is influenced by organizational requirements. Some organizations theories focus on the news firm and emphasize commercial imperatives; others are more concerned with the news organizations themselves and look at how their structures and division of labor affect story selection.
- c. **Event-centered** - The so-called mirror theory which used to be popular among journalists. This theory proposes that events determine story selection with journalists simply holding a mirror to them and reflecting their image to the audience.
- d. **Technological determinists** (the message is determined by the technology of the medium), economic determinists (view the national economy as molding story selection and ideological determinists (believe that journalists align the news to the political ideology of those holding power in the country).
- e. **External centered** - This theory suggests that the news is shaped above all by the sources on which journalists rely or by those groups in society powerful enough both to create what they call "public events" and to gain access to journalists.

Model for Decision Making by Dimmick and Coit (1982)

The model used for this research is the model for decision making by Dimmick and Coit. The taxonomy explicitly utilizes the concept of hierarchy by ordering the system levels from the most molar or supranational level to the molecular or individual level of decision making. The taxonomy aims at being relatively exhaustive or complete in specifying levels but it is necessarily incomplete in cataloging variables within each level (Dimmick and Coit, 1982). The media decision-making system is a hierarchy not only in the sense that the unit of analysis increases in size as one ascends the hierarchy and vice versa but also hierarchic in the sense that decisions made at one level may influence or place constraints on decision makers at the lower levels of the system.

According to Dimmick and Coit (1982), the levels higher in the hierarchy constitute the environment - or rather environments in which media decision makers operate. This conceptualization however also recognizes the fact that decisions units located at the lower levels may exercise influence at the supranational level with individual journalists bargaining with their superiors on certain issues. Once decisions are made however, the legislation, the rules,

the policies or informal agreements have the effect of either influencing or constraining journalists' actions.

The structure of the taxonomy is an explicit acknowledgement that while decisions concerning media content are made by individual gatekeepers acting in sequence and by interacting groups of gatekeepers in an organizational setting. The parameters of the decision process and the very structure of the organization are shaped by influences operating at a more molar level, such as the industry in which the organization operates and at the level of the society itself (Dimmick and Coit, 1982).

This model shows the interdependence in the decision making process on nine levels as shown below (adaptation taken from Rahmah Hashim 1990) :

Supranational & pan-national level influence



Societal-level influence



Industry level of inter-organizational relations



Supra-organizational influences



Community or market influence



Intra-organizational influences



Formal or informal group influences



Influence of dyadic communication



Intra-individual or cognitive level

Conceptualising Decision Making

There are many concepts of decision making. Morris (1964) and Simon (1992) although years apart define decision making as a model or logical structure which is used to bring some conceptual order out of the endless variety of observations that steers the course of society and its economic and government organizations – is largely work of making decisions and solving problems. It is work of choosing issues that require attention, setting goals, finding or designing suitable courses of actions and evaluating and choosing among alternative actions.

Gans (1980) description of the decision making process as story selection and choice, albeit a hurried one. Gans quotes Edward J. Epstein's research at NBC News, that if journalists had to treat the hundreds of choices they make every day as formal decisions, they would be unable to complete their work. They instead act on the basis of quick, virtually intuitive judgments which some ascribe to "feel" or "gut feelings".

A decision may be defined most simply as a choice between two or more alternatives. In practice, more than two alternatives are often involved but all the typical problems of decision making arise when at least two alternatives typically leads to some form of behavior that is consistent with the choice, a decision does not requires such consistency. Finally the choice between alternatives need not be based on any rational process of assessment and evaluation even though there is much to be said in favor of such rational processes. A group decision then is naturally defined by means of preceding definitions as a choice between two or more alternatives made by group members or by a group leader in consultations with the membership. If neither of these conditions is satisfied, then even though a group exists and decision has been made, we will not characterize such a choice among alternatives as a group decision (Group Decision Making, 1984).

Findings and Discussion

Data for this research was derived from in-depth interviews with the respective key personnel from both organisations under study. Four informants were interviewed from RTM namely Informant A, an Assistant Director of TV News Section; Informant B, a TV News Editor; Informant C, the Chief Sub-Editor for TV News and Informant D, the Deputy Director of News and Current Affairs. While from Astro Awani Network Sdn Bhd, Informant E, a Managing Editor; Informant F, the Executive Editor of Current Affairs; Informant G, an Executive Editor for Strategy and Informant H, an Assistant Director of TV News Section gave valuable time for this research.

The in-depth interviews were based on a few research questions:

- a. How are these decisions formulated in different stages of news production in terms of preproduction, production and post-production?
- b. What factors that affect the decision-making process for news?

- c. How has television and news programming patterns changed since Najib's reign as prime minister with his government policies?
- d. Which government policies influenced the network's programming?

Before the interviews were conducted, there was a need to look at the organisation structure of each media broadcasting house. Both Informant D from RTM and Informant E from AstroAwani were tight-lipped as the organisation structure in any newsroom was considered 'classified information'. But from the diagrams that these two informants scribbled during the interview, it was clear that RTM has a traditional hierarchy structure as compared to AstroAwani that practices a flat structure. According to Informant E:

"If you look at this, you akan pertikaikan di manakah synerginya but it works because we are very matrix... So maknanya apa yang berlaku sekarang ni ialah kita buat bottom up instead of orang ni bagi tahu apa nak buat, the reporters semua ada specialization. So the reporters akan kata, ada yang buat politik, social, sports, bisnes, semualah environment, every single tajuk. So all of our reporters akan cadangkan, so in our Monday morning meeting, kita kata okay this is how we gonna ah... apa... present minggu ni."

[Interview with Informant E- 23rd June 2012]

Decisions in Different Stages of News Production (Preproduction, Production and Post-production?)

Both media organisations work differently in terms of the decision making process at different stages of production. Sub-editors and editors at RTM determined the first round of selection for the news in terms of local, regional and international. RTM has an edge since they have regional offices everywhere so there would be an abundance of news to cover their every hour bulletins from 9 am to 1 pm, 3 pm, 5pm, 8 pm, 10pm, 11 pm and 12.30 am. Although AstroAwani doesn't have this advantage, what they have done is to deploy their journalists to all states making them specialized in their respective states, subjects experts and contact personnel that can be interviewed on different areas of issues.

In terms of decisions made for the news line-up, both organisations do it collectively as a group and deem the same stages as important which is the pre-production stage.

"Pre. Saya rasa pre sebab masa ni lah decision yang sangat penting yang menentukan halatuju program kita ni especially news. Kalau kita salah buat decision apa berita yang kita nak siarkan, something wrong, maybe lepas tu kena saman ke, apake. Itu consequences yang kita kena hadapilah tu. So penting kita buat decision sebelum benda tu on air."

[Interview with Informant D - 9th April 2012]

“It is a group decision. Because I will chair the 9 o’clock meeting, I will chair... 9.30 meeting, I will chair the 5 o’clock meeting... So it’s like a, it’s like a council of elders, you know? So it’s functional... because Awani is known for political stories, so what do we do now, we want to own a debate space, you know. We want to look at great ideas in different areas.”

[Interview with Informant E - 23rd June 2012]

Even so the decision making process for both organisations are also an ongoing process till the news goes on the air. These decisions will change according to the environment, the issue or something which Informant E categorized as ‘earth shattering’

“Err... no before tu pun kita memang dah, dah buat decision. Kita plan benda tu awal, kita dah konstruk kita punya panelist semua. Dah confirm date semua untuk kita siar and suddenly kita dapat kesan kata benda tu sensitif atau ada concequences apa, so kita kena buat decision sama ada nak batalkan atau kita nak teruskan. Tapi sebab kita dah commit dengan panelist kita tu terpaksa juga kita teruskan. Itu decision kita.”

[Interview with Informant D - 9th April 2012]

“Kita ada pukul 9.30 pagi, kita ada meeting for the day, so maknanya how to develop all the stories. And then pukul 5, kita ada meeting what will be the headlines, what will be the planning for the next day. So dalam tu kita dah ada kita punya pre, maknanya kita dah tahu how the story will be develop, how are we gonna apa... treat the stories. So the reporter will call ah... only to alert certain there if it is differing from what we plan because if it’s totally, totally different. Because most of the time we’ll know how the story will develop, you know. So far, it’s okay, kecuali kalau ada macam tiba-tiba something earth shattering happens.”

[Interview with Informant E - 23rd June 2012]

Factors that Affect the News Decision-making Process

Forces that influenced the decision making process in the broadcasting system are numerous. There are several factors that have been identified that influences the decision making process in the newsroom in the broadcasting system for these two stations. These factors can be further broken into internal and external factors.

Internal factors in RTM

a. Inexperience and New Staff

As the newsroom at RTM is understaffed as they need to cater for the hourly news bulletins, there are many new staffs that have been employed from Universiti Teknologi Mara, from reality shows that are very new to the broadcasting world, hence a lot of guidance is needed. And under deadline pressures, some of these stories have to be re-written and re-edited that sometimes do not meet the specific deadlines for the news. They have also taken staff on contract basis to fulfill the manpower needs.

“... dia tidak memenuhi sensitiviti, macam soal perkauman, soal agama. Especially budak-budak baru ni dia direct reporting tau. Story-story yang menyentuh macam kepala babi jumpa ke, baling-baling tu, dia direct hantar je, jadi kita kat sinilah kena sesuaikan sensitiviti tu.”

[Interview with Informant B from RTM - 14th March 2012]

b. Minister's Interference

Although this is not the current situation but this was highlighted as one of the internal factors that causes stress and effects the process of the news decision making process. The information minister in question was Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin (17th Februari 2006 – 8th March 2008).

“Contoh macam masa Datuk Zam, lainlah sebab dia newsman kan so dia tahu everything, so dia lagi dekatlah. Dia lagi dekatlah dengan kita. Dia selalu interfere maksudnya, directly dia selalu keep in touch dengan kita. Sebab news kan nak cepat, so dia selalu tanya dah dapat ke bahan ni?, Tahu tak pasal ni sebab dia newsman kan (laughs). Itu beza dialah kan.”

[Interview with Informant A from RTM– 14th March 2012]

“Ha.... Dia talipon direct kat office. Dia dengan kita punya bilik berita. Dia sampai tu that extend lah sebab dia newsman kan. Ha memang. Stressful lah kalau tu.”

[Interview with Informant C – 14th March 2012]

External factors in RTM

a. BERNAMA stories

Bernama is a government news agency that provides news stories for all broadcast, print and online news agencies. Reporters are known to check with Bernama

stories in order for the introduction of the news to be, at least, in tandem with the news stories. Bernama has been known throughout the years to be 'efficient' in terms of churning out the but of late that does not seem the case.

"Itu pun story dia kadang-kadang tak update jugak. Sekarang Bernama lagi kita orang sakit jiwa, story lambat... Dia dah bagi kat Utusan, Berita Harian, apa semua last baru bagi kat RTM, jadi kita tak depend sangat lah kat dia."

[Interview with Informant B - 14thMarch 2012]

b. Government as Stakeholders

As the government is the main stakeholder for RTM, it's not surprising that the coverage of news has a slant towards that end although according to the editors, there are no directive received at their level. Most decisions are done at their level with the 'okay' from the Deputy Director of News and Current Affairs.

"Saya rasa samalah dengan RTM, especially now days kan, konsep dia sama, arahan, story mengenai projek-projek kerajaan, dasar-dasar kerajaan, explain to the public. Saya rasa konsep dia sama je sekarang, especially now lah berita tv lebih kurang sama dengan RTM."

[Interview with Informant B - 14thMarch 2012]

c. Advertisements

Advertisements are also another factor that effects the duration of the news line up but not so much of the news decision making process per se.

"Let's say lah satu company tu dia beli the air time tu untuk 10 minit untuk olimpik report, so dia nak barangan dia keluar dan item on olimpik ni mesti 10 minit keluar, so kita kena ikutlah dan kita punya keputusan berdasarkan pada yang tulah.

[Interview with Informant D - 9th April 2012]

Internal factors in Astro Awani

a. Staff Unwilling Adapt to Changes

When Astro started more than five years ago, many 'old-timers' and new blood staff joined the work force. Each of these people brought in their old culture from their previous organisations, hence with the changes in structure that commenced

March this year (2012), many were forced to adapt to the news transformation and some couldn't, for various reasons.

“News has change but they don't want to change because no.1 they are not bilingual, no.2 they just refuse to change, no.3 they just have bad attitude. No.4 you're in an era where you are competing with online. You cannot wait for things to happen. You have go forward, so they don't like that, you know. And they are old and slightly lazy. I'm the oldest of them but I think I'm the most funky of all of them because I think I have lots of energy to move on. So because of that, this is not functioning.

[Interview with Informant E - 23rd June 2012]

b. Internal Censorship

Based on a recent incident that was mentioned 'off the record', there's now an internal standard operation procedure that 'dampens' the 'live' aspect of the news transmission.

“Ha lepas tu, since then kita ada SOP baru. SOP, any story from Astro Awani dia takkan go live directly. Sebelum ni kita live, just delay dalam 5 seconds. Sekarang kita ada satu process baru because of that event, kita terpaksa ada satu filter lagi yang dipanggil MPO news. MPO ini macam censor board lah Astro. Jadi, actually kita punya buletin semua tak live direct lah, in realtime, dah delay dalam 4 minits 5 minits tau because sebab nak filter story-story news ni.”

[Interview – Informant F - 13th July2012]

External factors in Astro Awani

a. Guidelines from the Government

The unwritten 'guidelines' that newsrooms are subjected to makes the decision making process more difficult then it already is. Astro sees themselves as 'partners in nation building' but according to them Putrajaya doesn't, so their content actually helps out the government in achieving them as they feel that, that is their main role.

“Very thin line. How are you going to... I mean, it applies to all the issues lah that you know, that is very sensitive, very prejudice. That, you know, kita kena make sure so that kita sendiri tidak akan menjadi tersepit di tengah-tengah. Jangan, jangan jadi apa?

Pelanduk tersepit di tengah-tengah.”

[Interview Informant H - 19th July 2012]

“Putrajaya dan ahhh... orang-orang yang kutuk kita dekat Facebook, tak sehebat mana pun. Most of them akan marah kalau kita bias. Kalau kita carry stories kerajaan tapi tanpa suara-suara lain yang tidak objektif, dia orang akan marah because they want a 360 analysis.”

[Interview Informant E - 23rd June 2012]

“Simple, executive power shifts the nation and the media institution exists within the nation. I know it's easier for people to look at how the executive controls you but any executive will have a form of relation in the media... Because Astro started near the end of the last millennium, I guess in the sense of corporate management, vision, spirit, soul and all those stuff makes for a more fertile ground for such set up like these and the spirit like this...”

[Interview Informant G – 13th July 2012]

b. Stakeholders

As per RTM, Astro Awani also has government stakeholders that they need to adhere to which is Khazanah Nasional but they don't receive directives from this entity. But given the government ownership certain boundaries also need to be observed.

“I would say everyone wants us to be successful. But of course there are internal politics segala bagai but I think that is just common in any organization. But when it comes to editorial, I think other than internal politics which is I, I rasa... almost takde impact. Everybody wants the channel to be successful. All the way sampai CEO dengan COO so they support. Tapi dia faham kenapa ada pressure dari Putrajaya because we are also own by Khazanah, due to share holdings. So but then again, we as reporters, you just push the.. the boundaries. Push, push, push and we have been successful in doing that.

[Interview Informant E - 23rd June 2012]

Changing Patterns of Television and News Programming

In general the news programming patterns have not changed very much since Najib took office. Although the duration when the interviews took place was

from 14th March – 19th July 2012, was a time where the elections timeline was supposed to take place, the programmes that took shape were the old programmes which were given a new lease of life in RTM. These were the existing documentaries, special reports, pointers for the radio DJ's, news and capsules (30-60 second segments).

Astro Awani on the other hand produces a news programme called Suara Kami, a programme about 'we', the people. They too concentrate on special reports, news and talk shows that take a 360 approach – views from the government and the 'rakyat' (the people).

Prominence of Government Policies

Overall view for RTM is to cover the policies based on the events as they unfold. There are a few policies that are given focus depending on the announcements made by the Prime Minister during the intervals of achievements accomplished from the policies.

“... of course 1Malaysia. Walaupun pada saya kadang-kadang tu 1Malaysia ni it's just a re-branding nama je. Just what wawasan 2020, rukunegara in one, dia re-branding je. Tak pe yang tu, cuma satu reason kita ialah 1Malaysia tu dah jadi KPI kementerian kita. Err... kita mesti beri penjelasan kepada rakyat supaya rakyat faham apa itu 1Malaysia and so far I think kita dah capai more than 60%.”

[Interview Informant D - 9th April 2012]

“Kalau polisi lain macam GTP, kita tunjukkan kesan dia. Macam dasar mengenai NKRA jenayah, kita tunjukkan statistik yang semakin menurun tu, dasar-dasar FDI pelaburan. Yang macam NKRA tu, index jenayah tu kita kaitkan dengan keyakinan pelancung dengan pelabur. Yang tu kita buat special lah laporan dia, implikasi kepada projek, program-program dan dasar-dasar yang diperkenalkan.”

[Interview Informant B - 14th March 2012]

On the other hand, Astro Awani takes the opposite approach where they don't go out and specifically pick up on Najib's policy. For example, Suara Kami, is very people centric, “so they put our hands out there, literally feel it, than they align that to the policies, not just Najib's policies but also to the opposition policies” says Informant G. He reiterated further:

“The transformation, the KPI the NKRA, those are bigger model group, bigger statements. So we go down to the ground and we bring that to the people ourself... It's not that we have to support any policies directly per se, it's about how that translated into the

people's life. We come from that end more rather than behind the policy.”

[Interview Informant G – 13th July 2012]

“For us Astro Awani, we prefer to jangan ada story yang terlalu one sided, balanced. Katakan kalau ada isu, isu yang berunsur dakwaanlah katakan. Okay kita seboleh-boleah juga akan memanggil pihak yang satu lagi, at least pemberitaan tu seimbang. Itu adalah dari segi pendekatan kita. Kalau Lina ada, ada observe Awani Newsroom, kita lebih suka macam tu sebab kita news channel, bukan propaganda channel.”

[Interview Informant H - 19th July 2012]

Conclusion

In conclusion, different newsrooms are run differently based on different stakeholders. While RTM has different influences in terms of decision making, as from supra-organisational (ownership dictates content) to industry level of inter-organisation relations (competing organisations) to societal influences (government influences), Astro Awani has one additional influence, which is community or market influence (advertising). As RTM sees itself as an information provider or mouth piece to the rakyat, advertising although important would not be the top priority. Astro on the other hand is just the opposite since advertising contributes a substantial amount to the prolonged livelihood of this organisation.

Theories of story selection for Astro Awani is very much journalistic centered as the structure is bottom up and very dynamic. The other theories such as event centered and technological determinants play a major role in the news outfit as the news is well integrated with the social network entity via Facebook and Twitter. The news is also shared between different channels in the organisations, radio included. RTM still follows the standard regiment of routine centered news line-up (local, business, foreign, sports). On certain occasions, event centered news also takes precedent depending on news worthiness.

Future of the Newsrooms and Policy Juggernauts

Transformation, in a nutshell, is inevitable and demands agility, adaptability and efficiency from communication professionals. While RTM's stakeholders are clear cut and there has not been much change in terms of decision making and news presentation with the change of Prime Ministers, Astro Awani has a different stand. Informant G who is the Executive Editor for Strategy from AstroAwani, feels that transformation is “a natural progression of information”

because “the amount of knowledge being gathered and propagated through the mainstream media for so long, gives it a wisdom that you can’t just cut and totally restart on a new blank page. So there will be a semblance of old and new where we’re heading.”

In general, as reported in several newsroom studies internationally by Gans, 1980; Joseph, 1982; Gaziano and Coulson; 1988 and locally by Liew, 1990; Faridah 1990; Faridah, 1995 and Faridah et al. 2011) it is a traditional practice within the media organisations that most editorial and other decisions lie in the hands of the management. And when the management’s hands are tied by the policies that dictate the decision making process in the newsrooms, most often than not, not adhering to these ‘guidelines’ would mean treading on thin ice.

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