

An Agenda-setting Study of National Day Coverage in State and National Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes an agenda-setting study of national day coverage in state and national newspapers. The specific aspects examined were the framing of the national day news in episodic or thematic terms, quotation of sources, and priming strategies. The theoretical framework of the study was the agenda-setting theory on how the salience attached to issues is influenced by the mass media. The media discourse data analyzed were 48 news articles related to national day that were published on 31 August 2016 in four newspapers. Textual analysis of the headlines and articles were conducted. The results showed that the national day articles were mainly in episodic frames, reporting particularly parades and events or competitions where the national flag is displayed. The thematic frames were mainly on the ordinary Malaysians' experiences as well as those with links to the 1957 events. The newspapers deemed politicians as the most important source to quote for newsworthiness. The politicians played an important role in priming the readers or the Malaysians to appreciate what they have. One priming strategy was to bring up positive values on unity in diversity, patriotism and freedom which had been achieved due to the sacrifices of past Malaysians. The other priming strategy was mentioning or showing symbols of national identity, particularly the national flag and sometimes the national anthem, to invoke feelings of patriotism. The findings suggest that the Malaysian newspapers tell readers what and how to think about national identity and ethnic relations.

Keywords: agenda-setting; national day; framing; priming strategies; media discourse

INTRODUCTION

Nations commemorate their independence day in the form of national day celebrations. In the United States, the Declaration of Independence is celebrated because it signifies an official severing of ties with the rule of Great Britain, and it represents the core of the people's identity as citizens of the United States (Military Advantage 2017). Patriotism and love for the country are born out of national identity. In Malaysia, the national day (*Hari Kebangsaan*) has been celebrated for the past six decades since 1957. The independence of the Federation of Malaya from the rule of Great Britain took place on 31 August 1957 and later the Federation of Malaya joined Sabah and Sarawak to form Malaysia of today on 16 September 1963. The national identity of Malaysians has been studied (e.g., Aziz, Salleh & Ribu 2010, Butler, Khoo-Lattimore & Mura 2014, Gabriel 2014, Ting 2016).

However, the national day media discourse in relation to patriotism has not attracted much attention as shown by a comprehensive search of the literature. The research that has been conducted on national day has been on other aspects that are relevant to the national identity of a particular nation. For example, the commemoration of independence from Spain for Mexico gives salience to their culture and heritage (Earle 2002). In Taiwan, it was the Taiwan identity versus Republic of China (ROC) identity which was analyzed in national day speeches by Chen Sui-Bien, the first native-born president (Chang & Holt 2009). Similarly, in Israel, analysis of their media discourse on national day focused on the Jewish versus non-Jewish categorizations (Handelman 2004). The Singapore government played an active role in promoting a particular Singaporean national identity, and there have been a lot of visual displays of patriotism such as the national flag, national pledge and national anthem in their national day celebrations (Ortmann 2010). However, researchers have not focused on how

the visual displays of patriotism during national day celebrations construct patriotism in various countries. Newspaper framing of the patriotism aspect of national identity in media discourse needs to be deconstructed to find the agenda behind it.

It is important to research national day media discourse because it reveals how the media constructs patriotism and the national identity and influences the salience attributed to the national day celebrations by readers. In countries where the media subscribes to the developmental model of the press and supports the government agenda, analysis of national day media discourse would reveal how the media promotes patriotism. More importantly, the analysis of the media discourse on national day celebrations would reveal the strategies used by the media to shape readers' perspectives of what it means to be citizens of the country.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The paper describes an agenda-setting study of national day coverage in state and national newspapers. The research questions for the study are:

- (1) How are national day news framed in episodic or thematic terms?
- (2) Who are the sources quoted in the national day news?
- (3) What are the priming strategies used in national day news?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF STUDY

The theoretical framework of the study is the agenda-setting theory which deals with how the mass media influences the readers on the salience they attach to issues. For example, newspapers place salient topics as the lead story on page one-use large headlines, and allocate a large space for the news (McCombs 2002). The pattern of news coverage influences the salience attached to issues on the public agenda. There are three classes of media effects, namely, agenda-setting, framing, and priming.

The agenda-setting theory was introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972) who first showed the role of the media in the 1968 presidential campaign in the United States. Agenda setting is a theory about “the transfer of salience, both the salience of objects and the salience of their attributes” (McCombs & Shaw 1993, p. 62). The media sets the agenda for the readers at two levels (2002). In the first level, agenda-setting, the media focuses public attention on a particular topic or object by selecting issues to feature – influencing readers to consider these issues as more salient than others. In the second level, attribute agenda-setting, the media emphasizes some attributes of the object while others get little to no attention. The aspects of issues selected for attention or how the issues are framed influence the readers' perception of these issues. Attribute agenda-setting is about the specific content of news media messages, including the tone. McCombs (2002) explains that agenda-setting by the news media works because of the individuals' need for orientation. The need for orientation is high for individuals who find the topic relevant but do not understand the topic, and they become avid consumers of the news. Individuals are not likely to be avid consumers of the news if they find the topic irrelevant or if they already understand the topic.

Media agenda setting is partially achieved through framing of news. Framing is the connection between qualitative features of news and public opinion (Iyengar & Simon 1993). Journalists can select from a number of alternative framing strategies to produce newsworthy stories (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). Issues are framed in either episodic or thematic terms, and the differences are explained based on Iyengar and Simon (1993). The episodic frame depicts issues as specific events (e.g., a particular poor person). The thematic frame places issues in

some general or abstract context (e.g., poverty) and the news includes background information on general outcomes or conditions and features “talking heads” or commentators giving interpretive analyses. Ivengar and Simon (1993) also pointed out that episodic framing causes news viewers to attribute responsibility for the problem to the actions of particular individuals or groups because they focus on individual and group characteristics instead of the historical, social and political contexts. To quote McCombs and Shaw (1993 p. 65), media framing suggests that “the media not only tell us what to think about [first level agenda-setting], but also how to think about it [second level attribute agenda-setting], and, consequently, what to think”.

Priming is an extension of media agenda-setting (Weaver, McCombs & Shaw 1998). Priming refers to the relationship between patterns of news coverage and the criteria with which the public evaluates the issue (Iyengar & Simon 1993). In other words, the news coverage primes the public on the amount of importance to attach to specific issues when making judgements. Moy, Tewksbury, and Rinke (2016) explain how priming works: firstly, the news activates pre-existing associated knowledge in the mind of the public, making the knowledge more accessible and likely to be used in interpreting and evaluating a subsequent target stimulus; and secondly, the public applies the primed concept to a target stimulus. The priming works better if the news is recent, repeated, relevant, and applicable (i.e., share features with the target stimulus). In this context, priming strategies are strategies used to activate pre-existing associated knowledge.

Although agenda-setting, framing, and priming are classes of media effects, they cannot be combined into a single theoretical framework as attempted by McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, and Rey (1997). Scheufele (2000, p. 299) asserts that these three approaches are related, yet different because “framing is based on premises that differ from those of agenda-setting or priming”. Suffice to say, agenda-setting and priming build on the foundation of cognitive processing of semantic information whereas framing is underpinned by the sociological approach which sees frames as outcomes of journalistic norms or organizational constraints (for details, see Scheufele 2000). Goffman (1974) argues that framing aids individuals who cannot understand the world fully to efficiently process new information and make sense of the world around them (as cited in Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007). What is important in this study is that agenda-setting, framing, and priming are related approaches to media effects which serves as a useful theoretical framework for understanding the analysis of media discourse.

METHOD OF STUDY

The media discourse data for the study were 48 news articles related to national day published on 31 August 2016 in four English language newspapers circulated in Malaysia. The Sarawak-based newspapers were New Sarawak Tribune and Borneo Post, and the national newspapers were The Star and New Straits Time. Two state-based newspapers were selected for comparison with two national newspapers; all four newspapers were major English newspapers at state or national level respectively as indicated by the readership statistics. The readership of the newspapers according to the verified audited circulation and distribution numbers for July to December 2016 provided by the Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia (2015) are as follows: Borneo Post (64,699), The Star (220,972), and New Straits Time (54,490). Readership statistics on New Sarawak Tribune are not available in the Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia report but industry sources estimate the daily circulation to be 5,000 (Borneo Post, 12 March 2017).

To select the news articles for analysis, the headlines of the four selected newspapers were scanned to decide if they had met the selection criteria. The news article was selected if the news items were out on the national day, indicated by use of words such as patriotism, *Jalur Gemilang*, love for Malaysia, independence and Merdeka. Articles related to Malaysian identity were also included because commemoration of Independence Day is associated with national identity in countries all over the world. In addition, the news article was also selected if the photograph shows markers of national day such as the national flag. Altogether 48 news articles were identified for analysis (13 from The Borneo Post; 8 from New Sarawak Tribune; 13 from The Star; 14 from New Straits Time). Table 1 shows the number of different types of news articles on the national day in the four newspapers. New Sarawak Tribune and The Star had more feature articles, and Borneo Post had a number of photographs with an informative caption, in replacement of a full news report. The caption contains essential details which usually appear in a full-blown news report (e.g., place, participants, symbols of national identity).

TABLE 1. Number of different types of news articles on the national day in the four state and national newspapers

Newspapers/Types of article	The Borneo Post	New Sarawak Tribune	The Star	New Straits Time
Feature articles	1	4	6	3
Photograph and caption only	4	1	1	1
News reports	8	3	6	5
Letter	0	0	0	5
Total	13	8	13	14

The focus of textual analysis on the media discourse was adapted from Alagappan and Lean (2010) who studied the framing of the Indians in an English language newspaper in Malaysia. Alagappan and Lean (2010) investigated the framing, sources quoted, allocated space, and priming strategies used by the newspaper to help readers to link between current and past knowledge. In the present study, the aspects of the news articles analyzed were framing, sources quoted and priming strategies.

The framing of news draws upon the framing theory which categorizes frames as episodic and thematic. Based on Iyengar and Simon (1993), news articles which presented issues or events as specific events were categorized as episodic frames and news articles which placed issues in some general or abstract context and included background information and interpretive analyses were categorized as thematic frames. Most of the news articles could be easily categorized except for “Memories of killing communists haunt ex-soldier” (New Sarawak Tribune). This news article described a retired corporal’s memories of a shootout where he had shot a communist at close range. The article contained the corporal’s wish for today’s generation to be inculcated with the appreciation of the value of a sovereign nation, which carried elements of present-day information. However, considering that the news article was about one corporal’s experience and a specific event, it was eventually categorized as an episodic frame.

Next, the news articles were analyzed to determine how quoting of sources creates newsworthiness of national day news articles. Examples of prominent individuals which make an article newsworthy are movie stars and politicians. In Malaysia, reporters show up if a politician officiates at an event. In the news articles, the sources are quoted using either direct or reported speech. Sometimes the prominent individuals are mentioned without a quotation of what they have said, for example, so-and-so officiated at the event.

Finally, the news articles on national day were read to code priming strategies used to activate pre-existing associated knowledge related to national day. In the initial analysis of priming strategies, the indicators which emerged were tangible markers (e.g., *Jalur Gemilang*) and intangible markers (e.g., values such as freedom) of patriotism. After several

rounds of reading the news articles, it became clear that the indicators signified two main priming strategies which were: (1) physical symbols of national identity to remind newspaper readers that they are Malaysians; and (2) admonishments to remind readers to appreciate what they have as Malaysians. These strategies prime the public to attach importance to the national day celebration. Taken together, the results would reveal how the agenda-setting of the four English newspapers is achieved using framing, quotation of sources and priming strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section describes the results of the agenda-setting study of national day coverage in state and national newspapers. On 31 August 2016 itself, the four newspapers carried 48 news articles on national day, showing that the newspapers intended to focus the attention of Malaysian readers on national day celebration and to treat it as a salient issue or topic. The national day news articles had all the markings of a salient topic as all the four newspapers put it as the lead story on page one, used large headlines, and allocated a large space for the news (see McCombs, 2002). The lead story was even in colour, clearly showing the red, blue, yellow and white colours of the national flag and imprinting the image in the minds of readers. This is the first level of the agenda-setting. In the remainder of this section, the results on the second level attribute agenda-setting are described to show how some attributes of national day were highlighted by the newspapers.

FRAMING OF NATIONAL DAY NEWS

The analysis revealed that the national day news articles were mainly in episodic frames in the four newspapers (66.67%, Table 2). Examples of episodic frames are “School holds Fly Jalur Gemilang Campaign” (New Sarawak Tribune) and “Family’s growing get-together” (New Straits Time). Examples of thematic frames are “Bridge of invasion – and independence” (The Star) and “There is no place like Malaysia” (New Sarawak Tribune). The proportion of thematic frames was slightly more in New Straits Time and The Star, because these two national newspapers carried more feature articles than the two Sarawak-based newspapers (see Table 1). A number of thematic frames in New Straits Time were from letters from the public. In contrast, the Borneo Post coverage on national day celebrations was focused almost strictly on event reporting.

TABLE 2. Number and percentage of episodic and thematic frames of national day news in four Malaysian newspapers

Newspaper	No. of news in episodic frame	No. of news in thematic frame	Total
Borneo Post	12	1	13
New Sarawak Tribune	5	3	8
The Star	7	6	13
New Straits Time	8	6	14
Total	32 (66.67%)	16 (33.33%)	48 (100%)

Table 3 shows the episodic and thematic frames of national day news identified from the four newspapers. The episodic frames reported specific events. The episodic frames were on events for celebrating the national day held by government departments and the private sector (including NGOs). The variety of national day celebrations showed the creativity of the organizations in outdoing one another in order for the event to be covered by newspapers. The newsworthy events were those graced by VIPs. The episodic framing also makes it seem

as if it is the responsibility of organizations to put up a visual display of patriotism for the organization to be seen as truly Malaysian and loyal to the country.

TABLE 3. Episodic and thematic frames of national day news

Episodic frames	Thematic frames
Parade	A better Malaysia
Fireworks	Personal meanings of national day
Decoration in school/classroom/car with flags	Memories of national day
Merdeka month	Appreciation towards living in Malaysia
Fly <i>Jalur Gemilang</i> campaign	Sarawak in Malaysia
Merdeka costume/uniform competition	
Colouring contest	
Walk/Run for the nation	
Bicycle fun ride or competition (with flag)	
Choral speaking/poem recitation	
Singing patriotic songs/national anthem	
Quiz	
“I love Malaysia” human formation	
Assembly (school/Dataran Merdeka)	
Hampers for people born on August 31 and September 16	
Dance performance	

From the episodic frames on national day celebrations, it is evident that the most common way to celebrate the national day was having parades accompanied by the singing of the national anthem *Negaraku* and other patriotic songs. On the photographs accompanying the news and in the news itself, the national flag *Jalur Gemilang* is prominent, and it appeared in different forms:

- Flags flying on buildings
- Flag colouring contest
- Flags on bicycles in competitions
- Flags carried by participants of walkathons and marathons
- Flags in I love Malaysia formation
- Colours of the flag on costumes in competitions

The national flag symbolizes the sovereignty of a nation. It is hung and flown in schools, government departments and private sector organizations in the weeks leading up to the national day. The national flag is the centrepiece of the national day celebrations to rally feelings of patriotism and reinforce the message that “We are Malaysians”. The national flag plays a significant role embodying the Malaysian identity in national day celebrations but this role is not as obvious on other days of the year when it is flown or displayed in schools, government departments and other organizations. However, the significance of the national flag for Malaysians who are abroad is undeniable. When Malaysian teams win either gold or silver in international events, the national flag is hoisted and the national anthem is played. In recent world badminton tournaments, the Malaysian players drape the flag around themselves when they receive their medals.

The journalists who wrote the thematically framed news on the national day determined the broad perspective to take for the news article, and this set the agenda on the meanings and experiences of national day that are salient. Examples of headlines for thematic frames are:

1. M’sians hope for zero corruption, better education (The Borneo Post)
2. There is no place like Malaysia (New Sarawak Tribune)
3. Family’s growing get-together (New Straits Time)
4. Ensuring continuity of our harmony (New Straits Time)

5. Memories of killing communists haunt ex-soldier (New Sarawak Tribune)
6. Bridge of invasion – and independence (The Star)
7. The lore behind the Merdeka mee (The Star)
8. Sarawak a partner in the formation of Malaysia (New Sarawak Tribune)

The thematic frames placed the national day celebrations in two different contexts, of which one can be said to be positive and another negative. The first thematic frame was the ordinary Malaysians' present-day meanings and experiences of the national day (News articles 1 to 4) whereas the second thematic frame was the recollections of Malaysians of the independence events of 1957 (News articles 5 to 8).

The first thematic frame on ordinary Malaysians' personal meanings and experiences of the national day looked at it from the present to the future in a positive tone. For example, in the New Sarawak Tribune news entitled "There is no place like Malaysia" (News article 2), four Malaysians expressed their appreciation of living in a multi-ethnic peaceful and harmonious country. They were a RTM deejay and a former Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) personnel respectively but no personal information was given for another two Malaysians whose names and photographs were included in the news article. A similar approach was taken for the Borneo Post article reporting a Facebook survey conducted by Bernama, where 12 Malaysians were asked "What is your hope/hopes for the nation in conjunction with the National Day?" (M'sians hope for zero corruption, better education, News article 1). These news articles had a positive tone because the ordinary Malaysians were appreciative of the good things that Malaysia has, and even when they talked about their future hopes or their dissatisfaction with unclean toilets, they spoke so in positive terms.

The second thematic frame was on recollections of Malaysians of the independence events of 1957 (News articles 5 to 8) and carried a negative tone to show that independence was not easily obtained. In "Memories of killing communists haunt ex-soldier" (New Sarawak Tribune), 64-year old Corporal Abd Hadi Kassim had tears streaming when he recollected the last day of the operation to fight the communists after which they were finally allowed to return home. After a shootout, he found that one of the communists shot was still alive. He found himself reaching for his gun and shot the man's body once and his blood splattered onto his hands and body, and he returned home with his bloodied uniform and was unable to sleep all night. The 1981 incident was still vivid to the retired corporal after 35 years. Today, two of his sons followed in his footsteps to join the army to serve the nation. Speaking from his background, Corporal Abd Hadi Kassim wanted the generation today to view Malaysia's independence as a valuable gift they are able to enjoy, despite not having to lift a weapon. This news article depicts the struggle and fight for freedom, which came with many sacrifices by military personnel. The personal rendition offered an interpretive analysis of the meaning of national day to Malaysians who were deeply involved in the fight for freedom.

In news article 8, New Sarawak Tribune took a different slant on the meaning of national day by showing the greater significance of Malaysia Day (16 September 1963) to Sarawakians compared to National Day (31 August 1957). The feature article entitled "Sarawak a partner in the formation of Malaysia" was written by a columnist who called himself Anak Sarawak. In the piece, Anak Sarawak identified himself as the Chief Minister of internal self-government and a Supreme Council member. Anak Sarawak outlined the history starting from the Brooke rule in Sarawak to the self-government of Sarawak on 22 July 1963 and the formation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963. There was no mention of 31 August 1957 in the article because the independence of the Federation of Malaya from British rule did not involve Sarawak; it was only later that Sarawak and Sabah joined the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia. In his feature article, Anak Sarawak also talked about the

development in the state and the challenges in urban planning and development. The greater significance of Malaysia Day to Sarawakians emerged during the term of the former Chief Minister of Sarawak, Datuk Adenan Satem (28 February 2014-11 January 2017) who succeeded Tun Pehin Sri Haji Abdul Taib bin Mahmud who had been the Chief Minister of Sarawak for 33 years. This article placed the national day celebration in the historical context of Sarawakian history and contained background historical information and descriptions of changes in Sarawak which educate the readers unfamiliar with it.

The framing allows the specific content of media messages to be made relevant to readers, and to influence readers on how to think about national day. The episodic frames of the national day were similar and highlighted the variety of celebrations to commemorate the Independence Day. By framing the news as episodes, the newspaper attributes responsibility to organizations to do a public display of patriotism and for VIPs to remind readers of patriotic values on national day. The public displays of patriotism are predictable after a while despite the ingenuity of individuals and organizations to think of new ways to celebrate national day such as bicycle fun rides and Merdeka costume/uniform competitions. The location may change but the players (VIPs, teachers, students, civil servants, Malaysians) and the *Jalur Gemilang* are constant. The repetition serves an important purpose in agenda setting because they imprint upon readers the salience of putting up a public display of patriotism to invoke the shared national identity.

In comparison, news in thematic frames has greater impact because they are more personal and historical. These thematic news articles show what the national day means to ordinary Malaysians as well as those to who have been involved in the fight for independence. As a result, they invoke stronger feelings in the readers, and are possibly more effective in inciting patriotic feelings compared to news in episodic frames. Thematic frames are like television documentaries whereby the journalists have a main message to convey and are not bogged down by reporting the 5Wh's of an event (what, where, when, who, how). Thematic frames can raise issues which are expected such as personal meanings of national day and appreciation of heroes who fought for Malaysian independence or controversial issues such as the significance of 31 August 1957 versus 16 September 1963. The thematic framings of national day news articles are more effective in making readers appreciate the fact that they are Malaysian citizens.

SOURCES QUOTED IN THE NATIONAL DAY NEWS

The sources quoted in news articles on national day were analyzed to find out who the newspapers deem as important to give credibility to the news article. Table 4 shows that most of the news articles quoted sources; in fact all The Star articles did. An example is as follows:

Our Olympic medallists were joyously feted and the jubilation of their success in Rio de Janeiro boiled over into the National Day celebrations as *Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak* hailed the country's many moments of unity. Today, National Day parades will be the centre of attraction at Dataran Merdeka and in all the states.
 ("We're a sporting lot", The Star)

TABLE 4. Number of national day news in four Malaysian newspapers with and without quotation of source

Newspaper	No. of news quoting source	No. of news mentioning source without direct quotations	Total
Borneo Post	9	4	13
New Sarawak Tribune	6	2	8
The Star	13	0	13
New Straits Time	13	1	14
Total	41 (85.42%)	9 (14.58%)	48 (100%)

The Sarawak-based newspapers tended to mention sources without quoting their message. Names of politicians and the school principal were mentioned but there was no report of what they said. For example:

The programme was officially closed by *Balingian Constituency Special Officer, Che Ghazali Haji Arbi*, who represented *Balingian State Assemblyman, Abdul Yakub Haji Arbi*. ... The auspicious occasion was made merrier with the participation of the school staff headed by the *school Headmaster, Haji Perti Sarchian*, the pupils and also parents of the pupils. (“School holds Fly Jalur Gemilang Campaign”, New Sarawak Tribune)

The focus of this news article was the 5Wh’s of an event. This article illustrated the two most prominent players in national day celebrations which were the school community and VIPs. The school community encompasses the principals, teachers, students and their parents. Schools have a large enough population size to carry out large scale celebrations, to attract media coverage (Ting 2017). Journalists are more likely to cover an event if VIPs and other prominent community figures officiate at the celebration. Table 5 provides further details on the sources quoted in national day news in four Malaysian newspapers.

TABLE 5. Number and type of sources quoted in national day news in four Malaysian newspapers

Sources quoted	Examples of named sources	Borneo Post	New Sarawak Tribune	The Star	New Straits Time	Total
Politicians	Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak Parti Bersatu Sabah deputy president Datuk Seri Dr Maximum Ongkili Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi Kuala Kangsar MP Datin Mastura Yazid Telang Usan Assemblyman Dennis Ngau	4	2	6	8	20 (40%)
Ordinary Malaysians by name, including students	Ng Nyot Ngo Azidatul Azman Muhammad Faqru Idzmeer Yahaya Jusin	2	2	5	8	17 (34%)
High ranking government officials such as residents and military personnel	Sibu Resident Hii Chang Kee Kuala Lumpur Emergency and Trauma Department Chief	3	2	0	2	7 (14%)
School principals	Sekolah Bimbingan Jalinan Kasih principal Zulkernai Fauzi	1	0	2	0	3 (6%)
Community leaders	MCA president Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai Ecoworld Foundation chairman Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye Kampung Aman Damai village head Batin Berangin Star	0	0	1	1	2 (4%)
Royalty	Sultan Ibrahim Sultan Iskandar	1	0	0	0	1 (2%)
Total		11 ¹	6	14 ²	19 ³	50 (100%)

Notes:

¹One of the Borneo Post articles mention both school principal and resident, giving rise to 11 total sources for the 9 articles

²One of The Star articles gave voices to a politician, a school principal and two students, giving rise to a total of 14 sources for the 13 articles

³Two of The New Straits Time articles quoted 3 sources, and one of the articles quoted 2 sources, giving rise to 19 total sources for the 14 articles

Table 5 shows that the main sources contributing to the newsworthiness of a national day news article are politicians (40%) and ordinary Malaysians (34%). The presence of other sources paled in comparison, namely, high-ranking government officials (14%), school principals (6%) and community leaders (4%). There was one article on Sultan Ibrahim Sultan Iskandar's view on the Malaysian identity. In fact, the community leaders which comprised association chairpersons were often also politicians or retired politicians, indicating that a politician's voice is very important in national day news articles. As members of parliament and state legislative assemblies, they form the government and are the people's representatives in the government. It seems that they need to be quoted to give significance to the national day news article. In fact, the need to have politicians to officiate at national day celebrations makes it seem as if community leaders and high-ranking government officials such as residents and heads of departments were invited as a second option when they could not get politicians to grace the occasion. This is partly due to the tendency for the event to be featured in the newspapers if VIPs are present.

Ordinary Malaysians featured in national day news articles were divided into two categories: Malaysians from all walks of life, and Malaysians with links to the 1957 independence. New Sarawak Tribune and The Star carried more feature articles, giving voice to ordinary Malaysians and those who lived during the independence years. The Star tended to interview ordinary Malaysians on the street to portray their meanings and experiences of national day. For example, "Memories of a lifetime" was about Ng Nyot Ngo who recalled wearing a kebaya and going for a movie on the night that everyone was chanting *Merdeka, merdeka* and she was 15 years old then.

Ordinary Malaysians with links to the 1957 independence events included retired military personnel and Malaysians who had lived through 1957 or whose parents had experienced 1957 events. New Sarawak Tribune reported the struggle or fight for independence. A retired corporal related his memories of killing communists in the fight for independence in Sarawak ("Memories of killing communists haunt ex-soldier"). Such types of news article mentioned participants associated with warfare such as armed personnel/forces, Sarawak rangers and Iban trackers to commemorate their sacrifice for the nation when they fought against the enemy, foreign aggressors and communists. The messages were meant for the younger generation and the post Merdeka children who did not know the sacrifices, hardship and struggles of their predecessors to fight for freedom from colonial rule and for Malaysia to gain independence – to remind them to appreciate a liberated and independent Malaysia.

The strategy of framing the national day news articles using the experiences or memories of Malaysians who had lived through 1957 has a limited life span. It has been 60 years since the independence of Malaysia, and Malaysians who lived through 1957 when they were teenagers are now in their seventies. They are the parents or grandparents of Malaysians. In a few decades to come, there would be no Malaysians alive who had lived through the 1957 events; the experiences of the great grandparents would be far too distant to have an impact on the future post-Merdeka children. And because of this, new ways of commemorating and evoking feelings of patriotism need to be found.

PRIMING STRATEGIES USED IN NATIONAL DAY NEWS

The newspapers used two priming strategies to activate pre-existing knowledge associated with independence and national day in the minds of readers, namely, physical symbols of national identity, and values. The analysis of the 48 news articles from four Malaysian newspapers revealed that these two priming strategies primed readers to feel that they are Malaysians and that they need to appreciate what they have.

The first priming strategy is the use of physical symbols of national identity, particularly the national flag, to invoke feelings of patriotism. The *Jalur Gemilang* appears in almost all photographs in the national news articles: on buildings; on bicycles in competitions; on costumes in competitions; in colouring contests; in “I love Malaysia” human formation, and it is also carried by participants of walkathons and marathons. The scene in Photograph 1 with Malaysians waving the national flag is common in episodic frames.



PHOTOGRAPH 1. Example of national day news articles showing the *Jalur Gemilang*
(Source: *New Straits Time*, 31 August 2016, p. 22)

In some news articles, the significance or the presence of the national flag in national day celebrations was mentioned. For example, *Borneo Post* which often carried photographs of the national day celebration without a full write-up had the following caption:

Feeling patriotic: An SMK Telang Usan student cycling into the school hall with *Jalur Gemilang* for the school’s National Day celebration yesterday. The programme included choral speaking, singing patriotic songs and a quiz. Students also competed to decorate their classrooms.

In the lead up to the national day, the *Jalur Gemilang* can be seen on buildings (inside and outside) and cars. In fact, it is the most tangible marker of the national day and possibly the most potent physical symbol of the Malaysian identity. It sends the message that “we are Malaysians” However, “do people fly the *Jalur Gemilang* to show only their patriotism? For me, it is more than that and this can be demonstrated in other ways. The priority is to ensure the continuity of our harmony”, says Datuk Wee Beng Gee from Petaling Jaya, Selangor who wrote in a letter to *New Straits Time*. This links to the second priming strategy of mentioning values to activate readers’ pre-existing knowledge associated with independence and national day which will be explained after this.

The second important physical symbol of national identity is the national anthem *Negaraku*. The ability to sing *Negaraku* is one of the top two important defining characteristics of being Malaysian (Ting 2016) but as a symbol of national identity in national day news, its prominence loses to that of the national flag because it is not a visual symbol and cannot be shown as photographs in print newspapers. Table 6 shows that the national anthem and other patriotic songs (e.g., *Tanggal 31* by Sudirman) were mentioned in 26.7% of the 48 news articles analyzed, in comparison to the national flag which was mentioned in 73.3% of the news articles. It is assumed that the national anthem is sung during national day celebrations and because it is a routine matter, it might not be highlighted in all news reports. In addition to the national flag and anthem, national day celebrations in

Singapore also have the recitation of the pledge as a symbol of patriotism (Ortmann 2010). In Malaysia, the national ideology *Rukun Negara* is recited by students in school assemblies but has not been mentioned in the national day news articles.

TABLE 6. Number and percentage of national identity symbols in national day news articles in four Malaysian newspapers

National identity symbol	National flag	National anthem and other patriotic songs	Total
Borneo Post	6	4	10 (33.3%)
New Sarawak Tribune	5	1	6 (20.0%)
The Star	4	1	5 (16.7%)
New Straits Time	7	2	9 (30.0%)
Total	22 (73.3%)	8 (26.7%)	30 (100%)

The second priming strategy to remind readers to appreciate what they have is by mentioning values. The mention of values appears in three forms: (1) quotations of sources such as VIPs who officiated at the national day celebrations; (2) the theme of a particular national day event; and (3) the journalist’s own rendition of the purpose of the national day celebration. An example from The Star is as follows:

The Beauty and Miracle of Malaysia: The prime minister last night drew from Malaysia’s Olympic success to urge the people to create more moments of *unity*. He said in his National Day message that while the country has achieved much, there is reason to be concerned about threats from within.

Table 7 shows that the main values appearing in national day news articles are unity in ethnic diversity, sacrifice, and patriotism. These dominant values can be seen from a perspective of time in that the sacrifice of past heroes from different ethnic groups enables Malaysia to enjoy unity in diversity today, and Malaysians should respond by being patriotic to their nation – and be appreciative of the sovereign nation they have. The historical events leading to independence and the changes which follow are reasons that Malaysians should appreciate what they have today and respond with patriotism and love towards their country.

TABLE 7. Number and type of values in national day news in four Malaysian newspapers

Values	Examples of values	Borneo Post	New Sarawak Tribune	The Star	New Straits Time	Total
Unity in ethnic diversity	Peace	4	3	8	8	23 (25.8%)
	Harmony					
Patriotism	Unity	6	2	5	5	18 (20.2%)
	Multiracial					
	Tolerance and acceptance					
	Patriotism					
Freedom	Love for country	1	1	11	3	16 (18.0%)
	Pride in country					
	Loyalty to nation					
	Loyalty to king					
	Merdeka spirit					
	Spirit of independence					
Sacrifice	Standing on one’s own feet	2	3	8	0	14.6%
	Freedom from outside interference					
	Freedom from prejudice					
	Freedom of speech and religion					
	Sacrifices					
Struggles	2	3	8	0	14.6%	
Difficult life						
	Heroes					

	Defend nation or sovereignty					
	Fight for freedom					
Appreciation	Gift	1	2	4	5	12
	Gratitude					(13.5%)
	Appreciate what we have					
Change	Social, economic and political changes	1	1	0	5	7
	Development					(7.9%)
	Prosperity					
Total		15 (16.8%)	12 (13.5%)	36 (40.5%)	26 (29.2%)	89 (100%)

Interestingly, a number of national news articles contain admonishments to readers to appreciate what they have. This appeared in 13.5% of 89 values identified from the 48 news articles analysed (Table 7). VIPs invited to officiate at national day events and news writers make it a point to remind readers to be grateful for the positive values prevailing in Malaysia today and to recall how the situation was in Malaya then – which is why it is important for readers, particularly the post-Merdeka generation, to know the historical significance of past events. Knowledge of history leads to development of patriotic values and openness to unity in diversity. A Malaysian should also know the contribution of heroes, sung and unsung, which is why writers of feature articles like to interview armed personnel who were involved in the fight for independence. For these armed personnel who fought against communist and aggressors, their love for Malaysia was translated to giving up their lives. The prevailing peaceful and harmonious situation in Malaysia does not call for armed combat. After independence, the heroes are people who run the country and exceptional Malaysians who contribute to making Malaysia advance one way or another to bring about change. The national day news articles also send the message that patriotism is now embodied in carrying of the national flag.

CONCLUSION

The study on agenda-setting revealed that the newspaper is an agent for the Malaysian government's citizenship education. In its development role, the media are partners with the government in promoting the national identity. The findings show that the agenda-setting in state and national newspapers makes the national day salient to the Malaysian public. By framing a majority of the news articles in episodic frames, the media highlights public displays of patriotism to create a sense of oneness using the national flag as a physical representation of the Malaysian identity. The thematic frames alert readers to the historical, social and political context of independence and the development in Malaysia since then, using the voices of ordinary Malaysians and those with links to 1957 events. The politicians' voice is used to remind the Malaysian readers that they should appreciate what they have. The values and the national flag are used to prime readers to appreciate the past struggles for independence and the resulting unity in ethnic diversity.

The unity in diversity theme is to be expected of national day or Independence Day celebrations for a maturing nationhood. For instance, Namibia, which celebrated its independence from South African rule in 1990, has "unity in diversity" as one of its main postcolonial policy concepts (Akuupa & Komes 2013). The performance of cultural diversity in Namibian Independence Day celebrations includes a parade in the stadium showing citizens from all walks of life; it is no different in Malaysia, and other countries such as Singapore and Australia. The value of "unity in diversity" needs to be contextualized in the concept of multicultural citizenship, which Wahat (2014, p. 55) explains as follows:

Multiculturalism citizenship does not only mean equal political rights to all citizens who originate from various backgrounds. It allows every citizen the equal rights to preserve their unique culture, religion, characteristics and identities. The effort to address multiculturalism citizenship would thus include the issue of social inclusion ... [It] reminds us that diversity is a prospect. Diversity is not a liability. ... It leads to a more civilized, prosperous and harmonious nation.

Unity in diversity is particularly crucial for multi-ethnic Malaysia and harmonizing inter-ethnic relations, encapsulated in the New Economics Policy of 1970, is still important 60 years after independence. There have been some incidents of tensions in ethnic relations and through the national day coverage, the news media plays its role to influence the Malaysian public to attach importance to national unity and to appreciate what they have. The media assists the school system in promoting social cohesion and a sense of Malaysian-ness (Wahat 2014, p. 59). The present study has shown the significant role of the media in promoting national unity and patriotism through national day media discourse, giving evidence for the developmental model of the press in supporting government agenda on nationalism. However, the study did not focus on the priming effects of attempts by the print media to engender feelings of patriotism, that is, whether readers' views of patriotism are influenced by the media discourse on national day celebrations. Future studies should investigate, for example, how reading the national day news articles prime readers to appreciate their Malaysian citizenship and what it means to be Malaysians. Studies on the media effects of newspaper framing of the patriotism aspect of national identity will reveal how the media shape readers' perspectives of what it means to be citizens of the country.

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