Online News and Public Opinion: How Malaysians Respond to News on a State By-Election

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ABSTRACT:

This study articulates the agenda setting function of online news that is shared on Facebook. Many news organizations today have their own Facebook pages in which they publish news stories or links to articles. Having facebook pages allow the newspapers to reach a wider readership as well as promote reader participation through the comments section on Facebook posts. When audience members read and subsequently comment on news articles on Facebook, it becomes possible to identify the effectiveness of a newspaper's agenda setting function by scrutinising how the readers respond to the issues covered in the newspaper. Content analysis was done on over 450 news articles from four major online newspapers during the Semenyih by-election in Malaysia. The study found that while the online newspapers and the readers do share some issue salience, the relationship is not as simple and direct. The dynamics of Facebook now enable news readers to become more than just receiver of news. Instead, they disrupt the conventional agenda setting function by becoming commenters who influence how other readers receive and contemplate news and issues.

Keywords: By-election, Facebook, Malaysia, Public opinion, Agenda setting, Online Newspapers

INTRODUCTION

The availability of Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have enabled traditional newspapers to engage with the online audiences by encouraging them to read, comment, and share news with other users. Today, large numbers of news organizations extend their content and interactions on SNS to get connected to the larger audience. Facebook is generally the primary platform used by news organizations to share their news stories and to encourage user interaction (Al-Rawi, 2016). This shift towards encouraging news comments on Facebook is based on the implicit assumption that commenting on social media platforms, especially Facebook, is a better alternative than commenting on online news sites (Kim, 2018). Most news sites have suffered from offensive, insulting, and brutal comments on their websites because of the anonymous character of their comment sections (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). Facebook, on the other hand, is more open in the sense that users can search about one another through a system of notifying users of others' likes and comments, forcing commenters to be accountable to their posts (Rowe, 2015). While the ability to create fake accounts still allows for irresponsible commenting, the amount of legit comments often drowns the impact of fake users. Most of the time, fake users are easily identified and apprehended by other users.

Due to the popularity of leaving and reading comments online, these spaces for public discourse have attracted the interest of media and communication researchers. Scholars have

examined news comment to understand the impact of interactivity and other content features (Weber, 2014), the quality of news comments (Rowe, 2015), motivations for commenting (Stroud, Van Duyn & Peacock, 2016), personal characteristics of news commenters (Wu & Atkin, 2017), and the influence of news comments on users' evaluation of news articles and social issues (Prochazka, Weber, & Schweiger, 2016) and their future commenting behaviors (Rösner & Krämer, 2016).

Following the interest in this growing body of study, this study attempts to problematize the relationship between news and news comments by contemplating on whether the sentiments shared by newsreaders in the comment sections reflect the sentiments presented in the news content? And, can these comments be constituted as a form of public opinion? Ksiazek (2018) proposed that news comments could indicate user engagement with the news, as well as offer insight into how users are participating in virtual discussions of current events. The emergence of interactive digital platforms for the provision of news has sparked an interest in capturing the ways that users are engaging, experiencing, and reacting to content. When users choose to comment on a news story, they signal a heightened interest by not only processing and reacting to the news, but by choosing to share their thoughts in a public forum. Therefore, news comments offer the possibility to learn about the effectiveness of news stories in influencing user opinions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Facebook Usage in Malaysia

The media and political cultures in Malaysia have been very much altered by the rapid rise of the online media (Wok & Mohamed, 201). The democratic openness afforded by the social media has especially allowed Malaysians to challenge the country's conservative political culture by daringly participating in online discourses where there is limited government control. This change in political culture was exemplified in 2018 when Malaysians overthrew a 61 years old government that had strong control over the country's media and political systems. The social media afforded Malaysians the avenue to get alternative news and to participate in local politics. Facebook is where most of the political discourses take place (Salman, Yusoff, Salleh & Abdullah, 2018) (Lee, 2017)

There are over 16 million active Facebook users in Malaysia (MCMC, 2017). The popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook was made possible by the improved Internet infrastructure, increase in Internet penetration and overall better exploitation of Information Technologies in terms of mobile phones, computers and Internet access (Wok and Mohamed, 2017). Recently, the Internet usage amongst individuals in Malaysia increased from 57 percent in 2013 to 71.1 percent in 2015, although the digital divide between rural and urban areas remains significant, there is a continuous effort by the government to reduce the gap (Lee, 2017).

According to the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC, 2017), Malaysians access the Internet very frequently (86.6% at least once a day) and are very participative in social networking sites (84.3%). Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Malaysia. MCMC (2017) found that 96.5 percent of the Internet users surveyed owned at least a Facebook account and 53.8 percent of the Internet users access Facebook on a

daily basis. The study also found that some 18.3% percent of social media users share political views. While the percentage of social media users sharing political views may not be that high, it is still a significant source of information for those who access it (90.1%). 86.9% of those who surveyed identified that social media is one of the main online information portals for them. A study on political engagement among Malaysian voters by Salman et al. (2018) supports the centrality of SNS in Malaysian political discourse. The study found that 63.5% of voters identify SNS as their main source for political information with 86.5% claiming Facebook as their main

SNS platform.

All the major online newspapers in Malaysia have a Facebook page and are actively using it to engage with the readers. They do so mainly because of the decline in the sales of printed newspapers. Advertisers are more interested to advertise on the newspapers' social media platforms where they can attract bigger number of audiences. At the same time, it is legally and politically more conducive for them to engage with the readers online where the government has limited control. The mainstream online newspapers that have direct link to the old government do not have a comment section in their online news portal. This is to avoid negative and controversial user discussions. However, when extending their news stories on Facebook and allowing for user comments, these online newspapers are able to technically defy the imposed self-censorship and allow readers to interact. Because of this, the Facebook pages of Malaysian online newspapers are definitely more alive and popular when compared to their online sites.

The Semenyih By-Election

The heated discussions and strong sentiments that went on running up to the 14th General Election signify the popularity of the Facebook pages of local online newspapers. Every news article that relates to the election was responded with high volume of shares and comments. In the comment sections, the newsreaders were bold and very daring in sharing their opinions despite the still strict media environment. The sentiments shared by the users at the time were quite cohesive and presented an obvious public opinion. However, no careful study had captured the public opinion that was forming in the comment sections of the Facebook pages of the local online newspapers at the time. Therefore, while there is a significant acknowledgement of Facebook as an arena for democratic political discourse (Salman et al., 2017), there is still a gap in learning about the content of the discourses and the complexity of the sentiments. This study attempts to fill this gap by focusing on the issues that are being discussed by the users rather than relying on generic observation.

In the context of Malaysian politics, a by-election occurs when a particular seat in the lower house of the parliament becomes vacant when, a member of parliament (MP) dies or is disqualified from being a member of the parliament (Moten, 2019). In each of this election, the Facebook pages of the Malaysian online newspapers were alive with continuous stream of news coverage and an overwhelming user comments. It is interesting to look at how the users are discussing the election and how they identified with the issues around the elections. On March 4th, 2019, a by-election was held in Semenyih, a small district in Selangor, Malaysia. The by-election was called because the incumbent assemblyman, Bakhtiar Mohd Nor of the Malaysian United Indigenous Party or Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU), a component of Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition passed away due to a heart attack.

The Semenyih by-election garnered a lot of interest because there was raising political tension in the aftermath of the GE 14. The current opposition parties seemed to have gathered a strong support and are challenging the popularity of the newly elected Pakatan Harapan government. Therefore by focusing on the news coverage on the Semenyih local election and relating it to the responding news comments, this article tests the 'first-level' agenda setting effects of online news by asking:

1. Do the issues presented by the Malaysian Online newspapers parallel with the issues commented about by the newsreaders on Facebook during the Semenyih by-election?
2. Can comments shared in online newspapers' Facebook pages be considered public opinion?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

News Comments Agenda Setting And Public Opinion

Undeniably, the volume and theoretical richness of research activity on Agenda setting have made it one of the most studied concepts in media effect research (McCombs, 2005). The concept of agenda setting was innovated by Walter Lippmann (1922) in his famous book, 'Public Opinion' where he posited the notion that the media construct public views of the world. Fifty years later, McCombs and Shaw conducted the seminal study of agenda setting. This study has been called one of the 15 milestones in mass communication research (Lowery & Defleur, 1995). The central thesis of a 'first-level' Agenda setting is the transfer of object salience from the mass media to the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). It mainly focuses on the issues, events or political figures of the media agenda, and how the media agenda impacts audience perceptions about what issues are worthy of attention. Coleman, McCombs, Shaw and Weaver (2009), defined it as:

> the process of the mass media presenting certain issues frequently and prominently with the result that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as more important than others ... the more coverage an issue receives, the more important it is to people (p. 147).

In other words, the amount of news coverage of an object would largely determine the perceived importance of that object by the audience. The level of importance or what McCombs (2004) referred to as salience indicate the transfer of influence from the media to the audience.

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

Traditional methods of investigating whether news influences public agendas require comprehensive and sometimes complex field study wherein a public opinion survey becomes the prominent way to identify public sentiments. But with the availability of direct user comments on news, it becomes possible to look at how media users respond to news articles and whether they place the same level of issue salience when compared with the issues covered by the news media. Therefore, this article aims to identify whether there exists a first-level agenda setting relationship between news media and the readers by comparing and analyzing the issues highlighted by the online newspapers with the issues talked about by the news commenters during the Semenyih by-election.

METHODOLOGY

For the Semenyih by-election, the candidates were allowed to officially campaign from March 2nd 2019 to March 16th 2019. This election rule is unique to Malaysia where it is illegal by law for politicians to campaign openly outside the allocated time. It was in these two weeks that all the online newspapers had daily updated coverage on the by-election. Thus, the two weeks campaign period was very appropriate for 1) observing the news coverage of the elections and, 2) comparing the relationship between the issues that were covered by the newspapers with the issues discussed by the newsreaders.

To answer the research questions, four main online newspapers with large Facebook followers were chosen for the study. They consist two Malay online newspapers that are written in the local Bahasa Melayu language: Malaysiakini (Bahasa) and Sinar Harian and two English online newspapers: Malaysiakini (English), and TheStar. These online newspapers have prominent online presence and represented a slightly varied readership. Malaysiakini, both the Malay and English versions were mostly read by the more urban, educated and politically liberal demographic group (Lee, Nayan and Othman, 2016). TheStar mostly attracted the urban, English-speaking and mostly non-Malay readers. Sinar Harian which has the largest followers is a staple for most low to middle-class Malay readers (Lee et al., 2016). These variations in the demographic and psychographic of the readers are important in capturing a more inclusive data that represented majority Malaysians.

Table1: Descriptions of the sampled online newspapers

	Number of Facebook Followers	Total number of all news stories	Total number of comments for all news stories
<u>Malay Online newspapers</u> Malaysiakini (Bahasa)	2.2 million	148	7100
Sinar Harian	3.9 million	152	7062
<u>English Online newspapers</u> Malaysiakini (English)	1.7 million	78	3850
The Star	1.08 million	72	3500
Total		450	21,512

Content analysis was used to collect the data. It is a common method used in electoral studies (Idid, 2017) especially when looking at news coverage during the elections. Ahmad and Buyong

(2017) content analyzed the political issues covered by several online newspapers during the Malaysian 13th election. Similarly, Salman et al. (2017) explored the agenda setting functions of the English online newspapers in that same election. Studies that focused on the use of Facebook during election have also relied on content analysis. Manaf, Taibi and Manan (2017) content analyzed the issues presented on the Facebook pages of Malaysian online newspapers and compared them with the public issues identified through a public opinion survey. On the other hand, Zainuddin et al. (2017) content analyzed both the Tamil online newspapers and Facebook pages of Indian politicians in the attempt to look at the issues concerning the Indian voters during the 13th general election.

A standardized codebook and code sheet was designed to record the data. The code book detailed all the variables included in the study while the code sheet was designed to capture the issues and slants shared by both the online newspapers and their readers. Three coders were trained on the materials by the researchers. A trial analysis was conducted to test the reliability of the coding categories. The coders were asked to code the same news articles and the results were analyzed using Holsti's CR (1969) inter-coder reliability to test the trustworthiness of the findings. In general, the test result indicated that all the variables used are above the minimum reliability value of 0.7.

During the study period, each coder was assigned with a newspaper and was asked to code the 10 most popular news on the 'PRK Semenyih' during the study period. Popular in this sense refers to the amount of response an article gathers in terms of the number of comments and shares. This lasted for 15 days. Therefore, each coder worked on 150 pieces of news. However, the English online newspapers (*Malaysiakini* and The Star) appeared to cover less on the election, thus a coder was assigned to look at both online newspapers and was asked to code 75 news from each paper. Since the number of comments on each news article was very big, only the top 50 most relevant comments were coded. On Facebook, most relevant comments are comments that had the most replies. This meant that each coder needed to code 7, 500 comments (150 news stories x 50 comments) that should total up to 22,500 comments. However, some news articles had less than 50 comments. From the comments coded, only the top 5 issues discussed by the commenters were recorded. Therefore, each news article could generate up to 3 media issues and 5 public issues. These issues were then grouped and categorized into 25 main issues that included Politics, Election, Economy, Crimes, Development, Education, International Relations and many more.

To gauge the agenda setting relationship between the online newspapers and the readers, two main variables were studied. They were the issues reported by the online newspapers and the issues discussed by the readers. The issues discussed in all the news articles were aggregated and ranked based on the total coverage. The same approach was used on the news comments. All the issues discussed by the commenters were aggregated and ranked according to the number of times the issues were discussed.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

As indicated above, this study adopts an agenda-setting approach towards understanding the relationship between news and user comments in the Facebook pages of Malaysian newspapers during two state by-elections. Results from the content analysis conducted showed that there is a relationship between the issues highlighted by the online newspapers with the issues talked

about by the news commenters. However, this relationship is not as linear and as direct as proposed by the traditional agenda setting relationship. The study identified more than 20 main issues discussed by the online newspapers and the news commenters during the campaign weeks. The issues included Politics, Election, Economy, Crimes, Development, Education, International Relations and many more. Each of these main issues is generic and is an umbrella to a variety of related sub-issues. The table below describes the 10 most popular main issues discussed by both the online newspapers and the commenters.

Table 2: *Description of the ten most popular issues*

No	Main Issue	Description
1.	Campaign	Issues about the candidates' campaign activities such as manifestos and election speeches and promises
2.	Economy	Issues relating to Malaysia's finances such as recession, inflation, poverty, tax, exchange rates and cost of living
3.	Election	Issues about the electoral system and the election process such as the election dates, rules and logistics
4.	Leadership	Issues relating to the leadership in the government and the political parties
5.	Local Issues	Issues concerning the voters in Semenyih such as infrastructure and development
6.	Malay-Islam	Issues involving the Malay privileges and Islam as the country's official religion
7.	Najib Razak	Issues pertaining to the conduct and misconduct of the former Prime Minister Najib Razak. This includes the corruption charges against him as well as his very popular 'Bossku' political campaign
8.	PH Admin	Issues relating to the effectiveness of Pakatan Harapan government's manifestos, policies and actions
9.	Politics	Issues relating to the political system, the strength and weaknesses of the political parties and the act of the politicians.
10.	Unity	Issues relating to the conflicts around racial integration between the different ethnic groups

In order to capture the issue salience in more detail, the results will only show the 7 most popular issues written about in the news to compare with the 7 most popular issues written about by the news commenters.

Issues Salience In The Online newspapers

The table below lists the top 7 most popular issues covered by online newspapers. While the ranking of the issues differs among the online newspapers, the differences were minute indicating that the online newspapers were focusing on similar issues.

Table 3: *Top seven issues discussed in the online newspapers*

Issues	*Malaysiakini* (Bahasa)	*Sinar Harian*	*Malaysiakini* (English)	*The Star*
1. Politics	81 (49.1%)	69 (39.2%)	31 (22.6%)	19 (17.3%)
2. Campaign	39 (23.6%)	36 (20.4%)	33 (24.1%)	29 (26.4%)
3. Election	17 (10.3%)	50 (28.4%)	14 (10.2%)	12 (10.9%)
4. Leadership	8 (4.9%)	5 (2.9%)	28 (20.4%)	27 (24.5%)
5. PH Admin	6 (3.6%)	8 (4.5%)	13 (9.5%)	5 (4.5%)
6. Local Issues	12 (7.3%)	4 (2.3%)	5 (3.7%)	9 (8.2%)
7. Najib Razak	2 (1.2%)	4 (2.3%)	13 (9.5%)	9 (8.2%)
Total (n)	165 (100%)	176 (100%)	137 (100%)	110 (100%)

All four online newspapers wrote heavily on 'Politics' and it was the most popular issue with the Malay online newspapers. *Malaysiakini* (Bahasa) wrote about 'Politics' 81 (49.1%) times while *Sinar Harian* wrote about it 69 (39.2%) times. The most popular issue for the English online newspapers was 'Campaign'. *Malaysiakini* (English) wrote about 'Campaign' 33 (24.1%) times while The Star wrote on it 29 (26.4%) times. News on 'Election' was also among the main issues covered by the online newspapers. 28.4% of the news on *Sinar Harian* was focused on the 'Election' and this made it the second most salient issue for the newspaper. Issues of 'Leadership' were more prominent in the English online newspapers compared to the Malay online newspapers. In fact, it is the second most popular issue on *The Star* (24.5%) and the third most popular issue on *Malaysiakini* (English) (20.4%). The Malay newspaper tended to focus less on 'Leadership' issues as it was written less than 10 times in each of the Malay papers. The other issues that were given attention by the online newspapers were the 'Local Issues' and 'PH administration'. The online newspapers also wrote significantly about 'Najib Razak', the controversial ex-PM who is waiting to be tried for his alleged involvement in numerous corruption and money laundering charges. The English online newspapers wrote on Najib more than the Malay online newspapers. This is probably due to the prominence Najib managed to create for himself through his active commentaries on social media. In the months running up to the Semenyih election, Najib had made a political comeback by starting to openly criticize the PH government that he claimed to be weak and practiced poor governance.

Issues Salience Among News Commenters

Table 4 depicts the top 7 issues discussed by the news commenters. The news commenters seemed to respond to the news shared by the online newspapers by also focusing mainly on 'Politics'. '

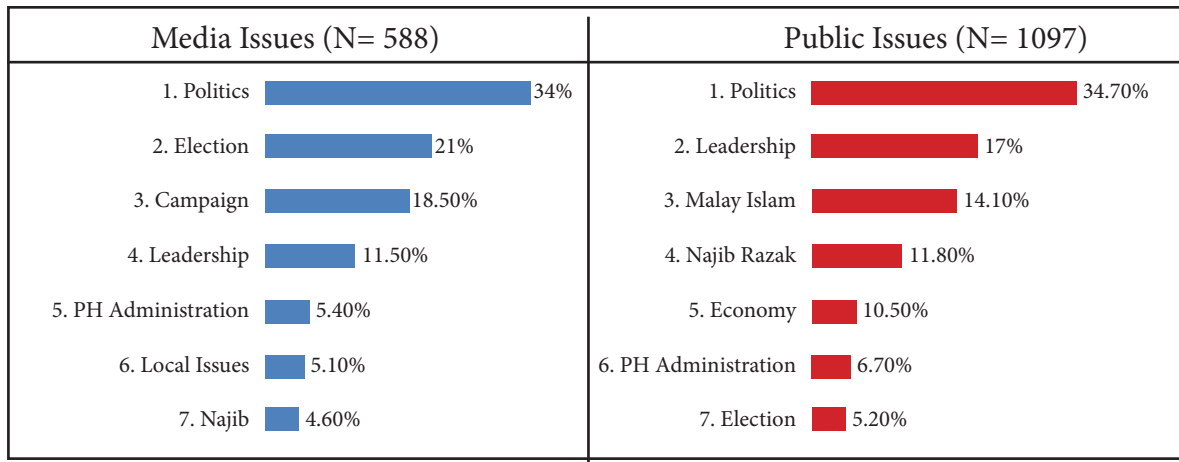*Table 4: Top 7 issues discussed by the news commenters*

Issues	*Malaysiakini* (Bahasa)	*Sinar Harian*	*Malaysiakini* (English)	*The Star*
1. Politics	147 (39.6%)	90 (40.2%)	74 (26.3%)	70 (30%)
2. Leadership	20 (5.4%)	38 (17.4%)	69 (24.6%)	62 (26.6%)
3. Malay-Islam	95 (25.6%)	32 (14.6%)	18 (6.4%)	5 (2.2%)
4. Najib Razak	35 (9.4%)	22 (10%)	44 (15.7%)	35 (15%)
5. Economy	52 (14%)	5 (2.4%)	33 (11.7%)	29 (12.5%)
6. PH Admin	12 (3.3%)	8 (3.7%)	33 (11.7%)	20 (8.6%)
7. Election	10 (2.7%)	25 (11.5%)	10 (3.6%)	12 (5.2%)
TOTAL (n)	371 (100%)	220 (100%)	281 (100%)	233 (100%)

'Politics' was the most popular issue discussed by the commenters on all four selected online newspapers. The second most popular issue among the commentators on *Sinar Harian*, *Malaysiakini* (English) and The Star was 'Leadership'. The commenters were mostly expressing concerns about the abilities of the current PH ministers as well as criticizing the credibility of the previous BN ministers. It is interesting although not too surprising that the 'Malay Islam' issues are more prominent among commenters in the Malay online newspapers compared to the English papers. It was the second most popular issue in *Malaysiakini* (Bahasa) (25.6%) and third most popular issue on *Sinar Harian* (14.6%). On the other hand, it only made up 6.4% of the comments made by the readers of Malaysiakini (English) and 2.2% of comments made by the readers of The Star. This indicated that there is a significant division among the newsreaders when it comes to the 'Malay-Islam' issue. Another interesting findings were the significance of 'Najib Razak' to the commenters. He was the third most popular topic discussed by the readers of *Malaysiakini* (Bahasa) (9.4%), *Malaysiakini* (English) (15.7%) and *The Star* (15%). He was the fourth most popular topic among the readers of *Sinar Harian* (10%). He was prominent among the readers of both the Malay and English online newspapers. Although the comments were both appreciative and depreciative of him, it was apparent that he was still relevant to Malaysians in general. The Economy was also a popular issue among the readers of *Malaysiakini* (Bahasa) (14%) and *The Star* (12.5%). The commenters also focused significantly on the 'PH Administration' and the 'Election'.

Issue Salience In The Newspaper And In The Comment Sections

The total numbers of issues were aggregated and compared in order to identify whether the issues presented by the newspapers parallel the issues written about by the news commenters. Generally, both the online newspapers and the commenters focused on a list of similar issues. Both focused on issues such as 'Politics', 'Leadership', 'PH Administration' and 'Election'. However, there were also issues that were not shared by both parties. For example, the online newspapers placed importance on issues such as 'Campaign' and 'Local Issues' while the commenters did not find these issues as significant. Instead, the commenters were more interested in the issues of 'Economy' and 'Malay-Islam'. The graph below compares the salience of the issue between the online newspapers and the news commenters.

Figure 1: Issue Salience in the newspaper and in the comment sectio

Media Issues (N= 588)		Public Issues (N= 1097)	
1. Politics	34%	1. Politics	34.70%
2. Election	21%	2. Leadership	17%
3. Campaign	18.50%	3. Malay Islam	14.10%
4. Leadership	11.50%	4. Najib Razak	11.80%
5. PH Administration	5.40%	5. Economy	10.50%
6. Local Issues	5.10%	6. PH Administration	6.70%
7. Najib	4.60%	7. Election	5.20%

For both the online newspapers and the commenters, the most popular issues were 'Politics'. There was almost an exact match whereby 34% of the issues focused on by the online newspapers were on 'Politics' and 34.7% of the issues highlighted by the commenters were also 'Politics'. Political issues are popular mainly due to the complex and sometimes instable political climate that had evolved in Malaysia post GE-14. Since it was the first time Malaysia had ever experienced a government change, all those involved including the politicians, the government and the people were still adjusting to the new political status quo. The new PH government is still learning on how to administer a country while coordinating within its own loosely tied component parties that have different ideals and work ethics. The Barisan Nasional on the other hand, is still reeling over its lost and trying to salvage whatever political influence it still has. In the aftermath of its lost in GE14, BN was faced with internal conflicts in which some of its coalition parties and members have chosen to leave and even join the PH government. At the same time, several of its top leaders are currently facing legal charges for many different reasons. To ensure its survival, Barisan Nasional or UMNO especially has moved towards building a strong relationship with PAS. PAS is the Islamist party that has a significant support among the Malays. An UMNO-PAS partnership can mobilize the support of the majority of Malay voters. These constant and rapid political changes affected the public who are also trying to come to terms with the new political climate. PH's inability to show that they are an effective government and BN's slow recovery is making the public nervous about the country's future. The newspaper captured these political activities extensively during the campaign weeks. Among the prominent political issue that arose during the Semenyih election was Anwar Ibrahim's accusation against PAS in which he claimed that the Islamist party paid a certain amount of money to Clare Rewcastle Brown to not pursue a case involving the PAS president Hadi Awang. Claire is the journalist who was responsible for much of the expose' on Najib Razak and his involvement in the 1MDB corruption case. The bickering that happened between PAS and Anwar is entirely political as it was mostly an attempt by both parties to smear one another. PAS and Anwar's party's PKR were not even running in the Semenyih election. The commenters were equally interested in these political issues and responded to them as well referring to them when commenting on other issues. Therefore it appears that stories with dramaturgical values appeal most to the online newspapers and its readers.

Although 'Politics' was the most popular issue, it was also the only main issue that shared the same level of importance among the online newspapers and its readers. The ranking of issues differed from the second to the seventh places. For the online newspapers, the second and third largest issues covered were the 'Election' (21%) and 'Campaign' (18.5%). This is probably due to the fact that the online newspapers were reporting on the statements and announcements made by the Election Commission and also covering all the candidates' campaign activities. This included the live updates on nomination day and polling day. Despite the extensive news coverage on these issues, the commenters did not find them to be appealing. 'Campaign' did not even make it into the commenters' top 7 most popular issue while 'Election' was the 7th most written about issue making up only 5.2% coverage of all the comments made by the newsreaders.

'Leadership' was the second most popular issue for the news commenters (17%) and the fourth (11.5%) most covered issue by the online newspapers. This indicated that the newsreaders were commenting about specific leaders and relating many news stories to the problem of leadership. Another interesting finding is the significance put by the commenters on issues relating to 'Malay-Islam'. Although the news coverage on the topic were scarce, the commenters kept referring to it even when discussing about other news stories. The 'Malay-Islam' issue became prominent among the commenters mostly due to it being used by UMNO-PAS when explaining their political partnership that had gone stronger post GE-14. UMNO-PAS had used the Malay-Islam narrative to gain support from the Malays. The two largest Malay parties used to be traditional foes but have recently been coordinating as a united opposition front. Among the issues played on by these parties were the threats brought by Pakatan Harapan's supposed liberal stance against the Malay privilege and the role of Islam as the official religion.

Another issue that was very significant to the commenters but not to the online newspapers was the 'Economy' (10.5%). The commenters were especially concerned about the continued rising cost of living. They were also apprehensive about Pakatan Harapan's strict handling of the economy where many projects proposed by the previous government had been cancelled and postponed. The PH's government's inability to fulfill their GE14 manifestos in which they promised to reduce the people's financial burden by demolishing student loans, highway tolls and cutting down fuel prices were among the points often made by the commenters. In short, the commenters were not happy about the country's current economic state.

'Najib Razak' is prominent among the online newspapers and the commenters. However, he is more popular among the commenters than with the online newspapers. 'Najib Razak' was the 7th most covered issue in the online newspapers (4.6%) and the fourth (11.8%) most popular topic among the commenters. This showed that the online newspapers were featuring stories on Najib primarily because he was able to attract a big crowd whenever he came down to Semenyih to campaign for Barisan Nasional. Najib had also made several jabs against the PH government and its leaders throughout the campaign week. Among others, he remarked on the PH's government multiple retraction and cancellation of its own policies and programs. While there was still a significant amount of condemnation against him, there was also an increasingly positive impression on Najib mainly among commenters who were critical of the PH government.

There was almost a match in salience when it comes to issues revolving the 'PH Administration'. It was the fifth most covered issue by the online newspapers (5.4%) and the sixth most referred issue among the commenters (6.7%). The online newspapers were reporting significantly on

the Pakatan Harapan, primarily focusing on the government's plans and activities. Meanwhile, the commenters were expressing their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the government's current performance.

The online newspapers also reported on 'Local Issues' (5.1%) such as the traffic and infrastructure problems faced by the Semenyih residents but the issue did not trigger much response from the commenters. This may be due to the fact that most of the commenters were the general public who do not live in Semenyih and do not find local issues relevant to them. Overall, it appears that while the online newspapers did focus on issues that were more focused on the Semenyih voters such as 'Local Issues' and 'Campaign', it is still the broader national-based issues such as politics, economy and Leadership that were more important for the online newspapers to write about and more significant to the commenters to talk about. Therefore, in the attempt to look at public sentiments in social media it would be essential to acknowledge that online commenters are not the locals that will be casting the vote. Therefore, they may not be able to offer a strong indication of voting behavior as a locally focused survey would. However, it is also crucial to consider that while these commenters may not be directly voting in the election, they are contributing to the political climate by asserting importance on issues that may not be significantly covered by the media.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The data found showed that during the Semenyih election, the Malaysian online newspapers and their readers were focusing on similar issues but were not giving the same amount of significance to the issues. As such, the issue salience between the online newspapers and the readers did not exactly match. Issues such as 'Malay Islam' and 'Economy' were not significantly covered by the newspaper but were extensively discussed by the commenters. This indicates that the commenters were not directly influenced by the news they have read. This brings into question the roles of news organizations that are often acknowledged as social institutions 'that produce and communicate statements about reality on a regular basis' (Ekström, 2002, p. 274). As agenda setters, news media provides the public with the information that helps the public understand the opinion climate around them (Hoffman, 2012).

Interestingly, the commenters in this study indicated that their opinions on issues are not entirely determined by the news they consumed. The dynamic of the comments section itself could be the main contributor to this. In the comment sections, the commenters as well as the silent readers are exposed to opinions and expressions that are shared by others. Similar to the concept of the 'marketplace of ideas', these commenters are not just informed and influenced by the news they read but also by the discourses put forth by other commenters. As a result, one news piece could trigger discussions about many different related and even unrelated issues. This could lead to two propositions. Firstly, since the issues highlighted by the other commenters can influence the newsreaders, the role of the news media may become less of agenda setters but more of 'discourse centers' that capture the liberal conception of media as 'marketplace of ideas'. Secondly, although this may appear to undermine and compromise the role of news media as agenda setters, it leads to the increasing importance of the comments sections as areas where public opinions are formed and can be observed.

When the significance of the 'other' commenters are stipulated, the ideas of opinion leaders, third-person effects and even the spiral of silence become relevant frameworks that

can delineate how media influence has become less directly causal but much more mediated by others' opinions. In the user comments sections, both the authoritative journalistic outlets and the opinions of 'ordinary people' appear on the same page. If a news article on a certain issue is followed by contradicting user comments, it would not only affect the newsreaders but also the public opinion climate. Therefore, while the news media is still an important source of news and distributors of agendas, it's role as a powerful agenda setters may be in question. The ways in which the news commenters are able to relate issues to other problems, agreeing and disagreeing with one another or even proposing a different and unrelated ideas altogether suggest that while the news media may not be directly setting the public agendas, they are significant discourse centers where issues are discussed and contemplated upon before they are accepted as a salient agenda. This means that while the agenda setting function of news media is still relevant, this relationship has evolved into a more dynamic interaction between the news, the readers and the commenters. Hence, to remain as an important source of news and agendas, news media must be able to strategically manage and negate its role as agenda setters and discourse centers.

On the other hand, this change in the agenda setting dynamic of online news has allowed for the capturing of broad public opinions and sentiments. The numbers of comments supporting or opposing certain issues are indicators of the public's attitudes and trends (albeit bias to the demographics of the news readers). Moreover, Facebook now has the functions that allow the users to express emotions and sentiments supporting or objecting to the news article or user comment. The number of likes or dislikes a comment receives might strengthen readers' perceptions on the popularity and importance of certain issues. While there is the threat of how populist and radical views will drown democratic opinions, optimists such as Soffer (2017) argued that the larger the number of comments, the higher is the ability of public discourse in balancing out bias and populist views.

In a nutshell, the discourses that occur in the Facebook comment sections of online newspapers are measures of public opinion. The discussions and sentiments shared are more than just public expressions. Rather, as indicated by this study, comments shared by others can disrupt the agenda setting function of newspapers by influencing the readers with alternative views and ideas. Thus, to remain relevant, news media must now understand and accept that news commenters are more than just readers. They are also opinion leaders that mediate the transfer of issues. At the same time, academic studies must acknowledge the dynamics of online opinions especially in regards to how they form and ultimately affect public sentiments.

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