

Readers' Comments on Facebook and The Changes in Traditional Agenda Setting Function of Newspapers

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Abstract

The article discusses the impact of reader feedbacks on newspapers' conventional agenda-setting role. Due to the decline in printed newspaper distribution and online news subscriptions, changes in the media landscape have led many newspaper agencies to share news content on social networks, mainly Facebook. Furthermore, newspaper readers rely on social media and prefer to read their news online. Almost all newspapers are now targeting their readers via Facebook as an effort to maintain their popularity. As a result, traditional ties between newspapers and their readers are shifting and shaping news's agenda-setting role. The audience comments on over 600 news pieces from major Malay newspapers published during the Malaysian by-elections in Semenyih and Rantau were analysed using content analysis. According to the findings of the research, reading news on Facebook changes the agenda-setting role of news media by enabling readers to join a dialogue in which they can also become meaning-makers. This implies that the role of the news media has evolved to the point of where they are no longer agenda setters, but rather discourse centres, which means that the news media is no longer as powerful in shaping public opinion as readers' sentiments are now influenced by the discourse that goes on in the news comment sections. This necessitates a reconsideration of how the media and politicians can influence public opinion, particularly during election seasons.

Keywords: By-elections, Facebook, online news, reader comments, Malaysia.

Introduction

Several news organisations throughout the world have used Facebook as one of the channels for spreading information in the contemporary day (Al-Rawi, 2017). This shift is mostly attributable to a drop in traditional news media consumption. Social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter are popular among the public, giving news companies access to people who have moved away from physical newspapers towards online news portals. Readers can read, comment and share news via Internet platforms such as Facebook. Similarly, news organisations prefer Facebook user experiences to interact with their websites (Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014). As the programme requires access to basic user accounts, Facebook gives less anonymity, pushing commentators to be more accountable for their posts and shares (Rowe, 2015). The ability to get online news through Facebook has created a new habit in which reading news comments is just as enticing as reading the news itself (Larsson, 2018). The increased interest in understanding comments as public discourse venues is quickly becoming an important topic of communication research. Material, motivations (Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016), personal characteristics of commenters (Wu & Atkins, 2017), and future commenting behaviours (Yamada, 2020) have all been investigated in relation to user comments. In response to this burgeoning field of study, this essay investigates the agenda-setting role of online news by exploring the association between news posted on Facebook and the comments made about the news by readers. News comments

can be used to evaluate reader interest and involvement (Ksiazek, 2018), therefore. the public mood generated in the comments sections of online news portals is being studied.

This study investigates the issues mentioned in newspapers with the discussion by Facebook users. If the issues expressed in the news articles are echoed in the comments section, it might be claimed that the newspapers' agenda-setting role is still intact. On the contrary, if the themes mentioned in the news are not reflected in the comments made by readers, it may indicate that the agenda setting theory's traditional transfer of concerns needs to be re-evaluated. This would have an impact on newspapers' ability to develop and influence public opinion, especially during election seasons when issues and sentiments are crucial in deciding voting behaviour.

Literature Review

Malaysia has a thriving media industry and a progressive political community, enabling researchers to examine the influence of news on user comments. Malaysia was widely regarded as an example of a closed media environment, in which tight government control over news and information, as well as public opinion often impeded impartial and efficient political debate (Wok & Mohamed, 2017). The growth of the Internet and the popularity of social networking, on the other hand, have dramatically altered the Malaysian political environment. Malaysians have been able to question the conservative political culture that used to confidently uphold the political status quo by having access to news that is not provided by the government-linked mainstream media, as well as the freedom to freely engage in political discourses (Mohamed, 2017).

According to the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC, 2018), nearly 60% of Malaysians are online, with 97.3 percent of them on Facebook. The study also discovered that majority of Malaysian Facebook users are very active and use Facebook on a regular basis. Facebook serves the needs of Malaysian users in several ways, one of which is by being a source of political news. This figure is endorsed further by Salman et. al. (2018), who discovered that the Malaysian electorate heavily relies on Facebook in their political deliberations. In their research on Malaysian voters' political engagement, they discovered that 86.5 percent of voters use social networks such as Facebook to access political information. In 2018, there was the culmination of this political awakening, when Malaysians voted out Barisan Nasional, a coalition that had ruled Malaysia for over 61 years, and Facebook was the primary forum where much of the political action took place prior to the election. Mohamed, Manan, and Ghazali (2019) discover that Malaysians are very active on Facebook, discussing and lamenting the election, especially on the eve of the election day, when all of the Prime Minister candidates gave their speeches live on Facebook.

Malay newspapers play an important role in the lives of many Malaysians, especially the Malays. Most Malay newspapers have a long history and were established before Malaysia's independence in 1957. Language is not the only factor affecting the course of these newspapers; political ideologies also play a role. Malay newspapers have been accused of giving extensive coverage to political issues, especially during election seasons. For example, according to Sani (2014), during the 2013 General Election, *Berita Harian* and *Berita Minggu* provided the most coverage, with a total of 1138 posts. The Barisan Nasional (BN) alliance was found to be favoured in the coverage. In comparison, another Malay newspaper, *Sinar Harian*, claimed to have more neutral and balanced coverage of political issues. While *Sinar Harian* was first distributed in Terengganu and Kelantan, it was later distributed in Selangor in 2007, increasing its popularity among Malays in both urban and rural areas (Sani, 2014). Malay newspapers' survival has historically been decided by their affiliations with political actors who fund their operations and have influence over their contents. Malay newspapers in Malaysia are less autonomous than Chinese-language newspapers (Chia, Fong & Neo, 2016). With the introduction of the Internet, everything gradually changed. As media organizations began to use online channels to gain more readership, Malay newspapers jumped on board. Being online enabled these tightly regulated newspapers to become more progressive by enabling readers to contribute through opinion letters and reader comments. *Malaysiakini* and the Malay version of *Free Malaysia Today* (FMT) were even more daring in their news coverage, competing with conventional newspapers that

also have a large online presence. When the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government took power in 2018, Mr Gobind Singh, the new Minister of Multimedia and Communication, vowed to uphold media freedom (Sivanandam, 2018). This liberalized media policy is changing the content of Malay newspapers, enabling them to become a more reliable press rather than just a political mouthpiece. Many Malay newspapers now utilize Facebook because of the decline in circulation, but also to communicate with readers on Facebook, where the government has little influence (Mohamed, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Lippmann (1922) invented the idea of agenda setting in his popular publication, "Public Opinion," in which he posited that the media creates public views of the world. In their 1972 research on the role of the media in the 1968 presidential campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, McCombs and Shaw (in McQuail, 1994) coined the word agenda setting. The theory demonstrates that topics important to the media would be of considerable interest to the public. According to McCombs and Shaw (in McQuail, 1994), the media determines the national agenda by asking people what to think about in order to influence political truth. In this way, readers will not only learn about a specific issue, but they will also learn how critical the issue is, as a result of media attention and positioning (McCombs, 2002). The power of the media to influence public opinion is represented at two levels. The first level of agenda setting looks at the relative importance of problems or topics. At this stage, the media decides which topics to bring to the public's attention. The emphasis in the second level of agenda setting is on the relative importance of the qualities relating to the issues or subjects. The first level is known as priming, and the second level is known as framing (Weaver, 2007).

Agenda setting is not a new concept in Malaysian political communication studies. The news media's roles in shaping how readers think about political figures are also critical, particularly during election season. In their research, Yassin and Zanuddin (2012) note that media coverage set media agendas as an attempt to control how people view politicians and political issues. The media's coverage aids the public in making voting decisions. The degree to which the media agenda determines the national agenda, on the other hand, varies from case to case. A study conducted by Kee et. al. (2017), attempted to investigate the role of agenda setting on English newspapers during Malaysia's 13th General Election. The study discovered that, while the media agenda in English newspapers aided the value of issue transfer and issue attributes to viewers, there was no significant relationship between the English newspapers and the public agenda among Malaysia's major ethnic groups. For example, even though crime is ranked ninth as a media concern, the public considers it to be their top priority. During the 13th General Election, Manaf, Taibi, and Manan (2017) conducted a similar study in which they studied the relationship between the Malay newspaper agenda and the Malay public agenda. The study discovered that not only do the Malay language newspaper and the Malay public do not have similar issues, but they also vary in terms of significance. According to Manaf, Taibi and Manan (2017), despite the media's emphasis on faith and politics, the public prioritized national security.

Tham et. al. (2020) investigated the agenda setting function of three RTM broadcast radio stations during the 14th general election in 2018. They discovered that because the radio stations were subsidised by the Malaysian government, most of the news was biased in favour of the then-ruling party, Barisan Nasional. They also discovered that during the election campaigning weeks, radio stations greatly emphasised election-related subjects, overshadowing other key concerns such as the economy, health, national security, crime, and education, which were regarded to be as important to the people. Thus, for traditional broadcast news, where there are no third-party interceptions such as commentators, the news media can still use the old approach of direct transmission from media to audience. According to the arguments of this study, such a linear relationship will not be sustainable in the age of interactive media, where message transmission is no longer direct and the effect of other news sources, such as social media, is crucial in shaping public opinion.

Mun and Li (2011) conducted another report on the agenda setting theory's applicability in public relations science. In this analysis, concerns posed by politicians and issues covered by the media were compared to see how closely the latter relates to the former. According to the findings, questions

raised by political leaders were given equal weight in the media. It can be concluded that agenda setting is present “in news reports on topics posed by politicians in the days leading up to the 12 General Election” (Mun & Li, 2011, p.44). However, the analysis did not seek to decide if the public agenda is a continuation of the media agenda; rather, the inference was made based on voter swings to the opposing party.

The traditional agenda setting research would necessitate a complex field study in which the content analysis of news would be supplemented by a public opinion poll. However, with the abundance of user feedback on social media, it is possible to observe reader feelings by examining the views and viewpoints expressed in the comments sections (Soffer, 2019; Carazo-Baranntes, 2021). This article's contention is to describe the first-level agenda setting move from online news to Facebook readers by asking:

RQ1: Is there a transfer of salience between the issues highlighted by the Malay Newspapers with the issues discussed about by commenters on Facebook during the Semenyih by-election?

RQ2: Is there a transfer of salience between the issues highlighted by the Malay Newspapers with the issues discussed about by commenters on Facebook during the Rantau by-election?

Methodology

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

Content analysis was the instrument used to collect the data. This method is commonly used in electoral studies, especially when looking at news issues coverage during elections. For example, Ahmad and Buyong (2017) content analysed the political issues covered by local online newspapers during Malaysia's 13th general election (GE13). Likewise, Salman et. al. (2018) explored the agenda setting functions of the Malaysian newspapers by using the same methodology. Studies that focused on the use of Facebook during election have also relied on content analysis (Mohamed, Manan & Ghazali, 2019).

Sampling

The newspapers sampled in this study were chosen because they have a strong online presence and a diverse readership. Malaysiakini (BM) is mainly read by people who are more educated, urban, and politically liberal (Lee, Nayan & Othman, 2016). Sinar Harian and Berita Harian readers were mostly Malay readers from the lower to middle classes (Lee, Nayan & Othman, 2016). These gaps in the ethnic profiles of the readers were crucial in collecting more accurate data that reflected the majority of Malaysians' political views.

Table 1: Descriptions of the Sampling numbers

Newspapers	Number of Facebook Followers	Total number of news	Total number of comments	Total number of issues recorded
<u>Semenyih by-election</u>				
Malaysiakini (Bahasa Malaysia)	2.2 million	150	7500	389
Sinar Harian	3.9 million	150	7500	241
TOTAL		300	15000	630
<u>Rantau by-election</u>				
Sinar Harian	3.9 million	150	7500	700
Berita Harian	5.3 million	150	7500	614
TOTAL		300	15000	823

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

Coding Process

To record the data, the researchers produced a structured codebook and code sheet. The codebook detailed the coding categories used in the report, while the code sheet was intended to capture the problems shared by the newspapers and their readers. Four undergraduate coders were hired and given relevant training on how to recognise things and topics in the news and comments. Every coder was given a newspaper and asked to code the top ten stories in the 'PRK Semenyih' and 'PRK Rantau,' respectively. The term "common" refers to the amount of attention an article receives in terms of comments and shares. This operation was carried out over a period of 15 days. As a result, each coder worked on 150 news stories. Each article has the potential to generate up to three problems. Only the top five issues discussed by Facebook commenters were registered. As a result, each news item can generate up to three media issues and five public issues. These issues were then grouped and graded into 25 major issues such as politics, elections, the economy, crime, progress, education, foreign relations, and many others.

Validity And Reliability

The researchers have carried out a simulated data set. The coders were given four news articles and instructed to collect data and enter it into the code sheet. The mocked data were then analyzed using Holsti (1969) inter-coder reliability to assess the reliability of the findings. In general, the test results show that all variables are greater than the minimum reliability value of 0.7. The statistical program IBM SPSS was used to record and analyze all the data.

Table 2: Operational Definitions of Main Issues

No	Main Issue	Description
1.	Politics	Issues relating to the political system, the strengths and weaknesses of the political parties and the behaviour of the politicians
2.	BN Administration	Issues reflecting on the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the previous Barisan Nasional government
3.	Economy	Issues relating to Malaysia's finances such as recession, inflation, poverty, tax, exchange rates and cost of living
4.	Campaign	Issues about the candidates' campaign activities such as manifestos and election speeches and promises
5.	Leadership	Issues relating to the leadership in the government and the political parties
6.	PH Administration	Issues relating to the effectiveness of Pakatan Harapan government's manifestos, policies, and actions
7.	Local Issues	Issues concerning the voters in Semenyih such as infrastructure and development

8.	Najib Razak	Issues pertaining the conducts and misconducts of the former Prime Minister Najib Razak. This includes the corruption charges against him as well as his very popular 'Bossku' political campaign
9.	Malay-Islam	Issues involving the Malay privileges and Islam as the country's official religion
10.	Unity	Issues relating to the conflicts around racial integration between the different ethnic groups
11.	Social	Issues revolving around negative attitudes and behaviours that are affecting the wellbeing of the local communities as well as the society at large such as drugs, vandalism, and delinquency
12.	Crime	Issues relating to activities that are considered illegal and punishable by the criminal laws such as corruption, human trafficking, and counterfeits. Issues regarding the 1MDB are considered criminal

Results and Discussions

The study listed more than 25 topics, but for the purposes of contrasting media issues with public issues, only the top eight major issues from both the media and the public will be delineated. Each of these major issues is a broad classification of smaller, distinct sub-issues. For example, 'crime' is viewed as a major concern that includes a range of smaller related issues such as corruption, human trafficking, and counterfeits. Table 2 lists the twelve most prominent major issues raised by newspapers and commentators during the two elections. However, each by-election had its own collection of issues that represented the background of the election, as will be evident in the discussion below.

Only the top eight issues will be addressed to determine the salience of the topic. This is because the eight issues are sufficient to demonstrate the necessary trends of news coverage and user comments for the analysis. As a result, the results below will equate the eight most popular issues written in the press to the eight most popular issues written by news commentators in each of the by-elections.

RQ1: Is there a transfer of issue salience between the issues highlighted by the Malay Newspapers with the issues discussed about by commenters on Facebook during the Semenyih by-election?

Table 3 lists the top eight most prominent topics published in newspapers during the Semenyih by-election, as well as the top eight issues commented on by readers. While the newspapers' rankings of the issues varied, the variations were small since the newspapers appear to concentrate on the same issues. At the same time, the readers debated similar issues, but the importance given to the issues varied significantly from the salience of the issues in the newspapers and this is an important indication to the changing agenda setting function of newspapers that has traditionally been powerful in orchestrating public opinion.

Table 3: Comparison of the top eight issues highlighted by the Malay newspaper and the news commenters during the Semenyih by-election

Issues Highlighted by Malay Newspapers				Issues Highlighted by Commenters			
Issues	Malaysia Kini	Sinar Harian	Total	Issues	Malaysia Kini	Sinar Harian	Total
Politics	81 (58%)	69 (39%)	150 (47%)	Politics	147 (38%)	90 (37%)	237 (38%)
Election	17 (12%)	86 (48%)	103 (32%)	Malay-Islam	95 (24%)	32 (13%)	127 (20%)
Malay-Islam	14 (10%)	2 (1%)	16 (5%)	Economy	52 (13%)	15 (6%)	67 (11%)
Local Issues	12 (8%)	3 (2%)	15 (5%)	Leadership	20 (9%)	38 (16%)	58 (9%)
Leadership	8 (6%)	5 (3%)	13 (4%)	Election	15 (6%)	25 (10%)	40 (6%)
PH Admin	5 (4%)	6 (3%)	11 (3%)	Najib	35 (9%)	22 (9%)	57 (9%)
Development	2 (1%)	3 (2%)	5 (2%)	Razak	22 (6%)	18 (8%)	40 (6%)
Najib Razak	1 (1%)	4 (2%)	5 (2%)	PH Admin	3 (1%)	1 (1%)	4 (1%)
Total	140 (100%)	178 (100%)	168 (100%)	Sosial	389 (100%)	241 (100%)	630 (100%)

During the Semenyih by-election, both newspapers and reader comments concentrated on political issues. Malaysiakini covered political topics 81 (58 percent) of the time, while Sinar Harian covered them 69 (39 percent) of the time. Politics was also the most common subject debated by news analysts, which was a positive response (38 percent). Political concerns are more appealing because they often contain dramaturgical elements that play with the emotions and sentiments of the readers. The post-GE-14 political environment provided several political narratives in the background of the Semenyih by-election. The new PH government is made up of a variety of loosely connected political parties that must now learn to work together amid their differences. Around the same time, they seemed to be struggling to execute their election platform, suggesting that they were unprepared for their victory. They had made many commitments in the manifesto that were too costly to carry out, such as toll-free highways and lower oil and gas prices. As a result, the public was dissatisfied, and the PH government had to make significant efforts to address the negative public opinion. On the other hand, the Barisan Nasional alliance, which had dominated Malaysia for over 61 years, was still reeling from their defeat and adjusting to their new role as the opposition. In the midst of this, the Barisan Nasional coalition formed an alliance with the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, or PAS, an Islamist group that had previously been their political adversary. The UMNO-PAS collaboration is a strategic attempt to mobilize the majority Malay voters' support. These developments piqued the interest of readers who, like them, are struggling with the new political system. While politics was the most prominent subject, it was also the only major issue that received equal attention from newspapers and readers. Only on politics did the newspapers and readers agree on the importance of topics, as they each claimed a different degree of importance on other issues.

Since the analysis was performed during election season, it is natural that election news was extensively covered in the newspapers. 48 percent of Sinar Harian's news coverage was election-related, including coverage of election announcements and political campaigns. Election concerns did not seem to pique the public's attention, despite being rated as the sixth most important topic. Just 6 percent of the comments were linked to the election. This may be because election campaign news mostly consisted of event reporting, and although it received extensive coverage, it was not interesting for the reader to provide feedback. Instead, the commenters were more interested in discussing the Malay-Islam controversy. Although there was no coverage of the subject in the press, commenters kept bringing it up

even while addressing other news items. 24 percent of Malaysiakini commenters addressed it, while 13 percent of Sinar Harian commenters did the same. This may be because the Malay newspapers were primarily aimed at the majority Malays, who tend to be influenced by the Malay-Muslim sentiment fostered by UMNO-PAS, the predominantly Malay-based opposition parties.

Local (5 percent) and development (2 percent) topics were heavily covered by newspapers but not discussed by readers. Most readers are members of the public who are not usually local voters. As a result, they are more involved in generic national topics that are more important to them. This is reinforced further by the importance placed by the readers on the economic question. Despite the newspaper's lack of focus on economic problems, the commenters were seriously debating them, rendering the economy the third most significant topic among the commenters (11 percent). The readers have commented on social problems which, while not extensively discussed, indicates that the commenters were worried about the subject even though it was not highlighted in the newspaper.

Najib Razak is well-known among journalists and commentators. However, he is more famous among commentators than among newspapers. Najib Razak was the eighth most covered subject in newspapers (2 percent) and the sixth (9 percent) most common topic among commenters. This illustrated that the newspapers were featuring articles on Najib largely because he could draw a large crowd whenever he visited Semenyih to campaign for Barisan Nasional. Throughout the campaign week, Najib made many jabs at the PH government and its leaders. He remarked, among other things, on the PH government's repeated retraction and cancellation of its own policies and programs. Although there was still widespread criticism of Najib, there was also a growing positive opinion of him among commentators who were critical of the PH government. Leadership and PH Administration were two other topics that were significant to both newspapers and newsreaders. However, as opposed to newspapers, it appears that readers prioritized these topics. For example, only 4 percent of the news was about Leadership, whereas commenters were heavily discussing the subject, making it the fifth most salient (9 percent) problem among newsreaders.

RQ2: Is there a transfer of issue salience between the issues highlighted by the Malay Newspapers with the issues discussed about by commenters on Facebook during the Rantau by-election?

Table 4 below shows the top eight issues highlighted by both the newspapers and the readers during the Rantau by-election. Similar to the Semenyih by-election, the Malay newspapers and their readers highlighted similar issues. However, the rank of importance given to these issues differed notably.

Table 4: Comparison of the top eight issues highlighted by the Malay newspaper and the news commenters during the Rantau By-election

Issues Highlighted by Malay Newspapers				Top Issues Highlighted by Commenters			
Issues	Sinar Harian	Berita Harian	Total	Issues	Sinar Harian	Berita Harian	Total
Politics	86 (33%)	40 (20%)	126 (27%)	Leadership	159 (22%)	125 (20%)	284 (22%)
Election	55 (21%)	81 (40%)	136 (29%)	Politics	146 (21%)	119 (19%)	265 (20%)
Leadership	72 (27%)	31 (15%)	103 (22%)	Election	139 (20%)	117 (19%)	256 (19%)
PH Admin	6 (2%)	26 (13%)	32 (7%)	PH Admin	111 (16%)	132 (22%)	243 (18%)
Development	11 (4%)	10 (5%)	21 (5%)	Malay-Islam	83 (12%)	46 (8%)	129 (10%)
Unity	15 (6%)	2 (1%)	17 (4%)	BN Admin	28 (4%)	46 (7%)	74 (6%)
Economy	13	3	16	Economy	28	13	41

	(5%)	(1%)	(3%)		(4%)	(2%)	(3%)
Malay-Islam	5	10	15	Crimes	6	16	22
	(2%)	(5%)	(3%)		(1%)	(3%)	(2%)
	263	203	466		700	614	1314
	(100)	(100%)	(100%)		(100%)	(100%)	(100%)

Newspapers were primarily reporting political and election news, as is customary during election seasons (Sani, 2014). Indeed, more than half of the news coverage at the time was focused on politics (27 percent) and elections (29 percent). The newsreaders seemed to agree, as they spoke deeply on both subjects. Politics (20 percent) and Election (19 percent) were the second and third most common topics in the reader comments. The apparent disunity among the PH political parties was an example of a Rantau-specific political problem. Although BN was able to demonstrate close cooperation with its alliances such as PAS, MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), Parti Keadilan Nasional or PKR, the party supporting PH, appeared to be campaigning on its own with little support from its PH counterparts. As a result, the media and public speculated that the new government is divided. It is worth noting, however, that during the Rantau by-election, newsreaders put the greatest emphasis (20 percent) on leadership issues. Both *Sinar Harian* (22 percent) and *Berita Harian* (20 percent) newsreaders made important comments on leadership. Most of the comments were critical of the new administration. They raised reservations about the new PH ministers' abilities and questioned the integrity of previous BN ministers. At the same time, they were making important comments about the legacy of Rantau's current assemblyman, Datuk Mohamad Hassan, who was also the vice president of UMNO.

The revival of Barisan Nasional among newsreaders was an interesting development during the Rantau by-election. 'BN Administration' (6 percent) was more common among commentators than among newspapers. As a result, BN was still applicable to the commenters. Although the comments were both negative and constructive, it is still a significant takeaway that the commenters were discussing BN rather than PH. This might also pave the way for a BN comeback, as they won the previous two by-elections in Semenyih and Cameron Highlands. There were four major topics that were separate and could not be decided upon by the newspapers or readers. While newspapers wrote extensively about issues of unity (4 percent) and development (5 percent), readers regarded the topics not as important. Instead, they commented on issues that were not covered in the media, such as the BN Administration (6 percent) and crime (2 percent). This calls into question the agenda-setting convention, which is concerned with the transition of problem salience from the media to the public. In this situation, there is a mismatch between the importance of issues as reported by newspapers and the importance of issues as reported by readers. This suggested that when reporting on news stories that weren't directly about the two topics, the newsreaders were writing about 'BN Administration' and 'Crime.' As a result, views on these topics are not always linked to the press.

The Malay-Islam issue remained prevalent during Rantau, more so for readers than for newspapers, as if a continuation from the Semenyih by-election. Malay-Islam was the eighth most influential topic highlighted by newspapers (3 percent) and the fifth (10 percent) most important issue among readers. Many commenters challenged the PH government's ability to secure Malay rights and privileges. This means that Malay newspaper readers were concerned about their future under the PH administration. In relation to this, it was also important to discover that the commenters were heavily debating the 'BN Administration,' suggesting that the old administration is still significant to the public amid the coalition's current problems. The fourth most significant topic for both newspapers and newsreaders were PH Administration. However, the amount of weight given was very different, as it only made-up 7 percent of the news coverage, while newsreaders assigned it a comparatively higher importance of 18 percent.

About economy, both newspapers and newsreaders agree, and it is ranked as the seventh most important topic by newspapers (3 percent) and readers (3 percent). The readers commented about the increasing cost of living. They were also concerned about PH's strict economic management, which resulted in the cancellation and postponement of several projects planned by the previous government. While the prevalence of local issues focused on Rantau, it appears that more generic, national-based

issues such as 'Politics' and 'Economy' were given more weight by both the newspapers and their readers. As a result, it is important to note that online sentiments may not be the most reliable indicator of election outcomes, as news commentators are non-locals from various parts of the world. Online sentiments can have a greater impact on general elections than on smaller, local elections such as Rantau and Semenyih by-elections. Despite this, it is equally important to remember that, whilst the sentiments expressed by online news commenters may not be directly relevant to the voters' decisions, they may still have an impact on the issues surrounding the election.

Conclusion

This study analysed issues addressed during by-elections and found that, while newspapers and their readers were interested in similar issues, the transfer of issue salience was not as direct. This meant that, while there were issue transfers from newspapers to readers, issue salience transfers were restricted. For example, while readers were extensively commenting on 'Malay Islam' and the BN Administration, the newspaper made no mention of them, bringing into question the role of media as social organisations that "create and communicate claims about truth on a daily basis" (Ekström, 2002, p. 274). If the commentators are debating matters that are not covered in the media, the question of who or what is influencing the commenters' opinions on issues arises. Because of the difference in problem salience, newsreaders' opinions are no longer influenced by what they read. This could be because of the presence of the comments section, which exposes readers to other people's opinions and suggestions that may or may not match to the underlying news piece (Kim et. al., 2018). As a result, readers, like a depiction of the "marketplace of ideas," are not only informed by the news they read, but they are also able to associate the news with perspectives expressed in active discourses in the comments area. As a result, when a single news article is told and argued by hundreds of other individuals, it can be seen differently (Ziegele, Breiner & Quiring, 2014). When authoritative journalistic perspectives and the opinions of "ordinary people" coexist on the same page, the news media's agenda-setting role is filtered by reader opinions. Comments that contradict the mood represented in the news have the potential to undercut newspapers' agenda-setting role and possibly upset public opinion. When this happens, the power of the news media to create agendas is threatened. Furthermore, news sources are evolving into discourse centres, allowing readers to interact with one another while expressing their opinions and emphasising matters of importance. While this study argued strongly against the news media's role as agenda setters, it also complimented the media's role as discourse centres, which are crucial in moulding public opinion. In conclusion, the study reveals that the role of news media has evolved, which means that news media organisations must become more dynamic in presenting news while moderating the views expressed in comment sections. This also implies that, when it comes to politics in particular, public opinion is no longer simple. Politicians must now concentrate their efforts on influencing the media agenda as well as the opinion leaders who emerge in the comment sections. Future research can help by understanding the changing nature of online public opinion and developing sophisticated ways for strategically determining how ideas and attitudes flow and evolve across online networks.

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