Media Representation of a By-Election in Batang Ai, Sarawak

Dr Jeniri Amir Senior Lecturer Fakulti Sains Sosial Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Abstract

The press provides important information that is so much required by the voters during any election. Hence, during election time, including by-election like in Batang Ai on 7 April 2009, politicians would try their best to get across their message to the voters through the media. Media being a powerful agent of dissemination will enable the voters to obtain the relevant information, thus be supportive of the candidate and the party concerned. The overall objective of this paper is to examine the coverage of the Batang Ai by election in *The Borneo Post*. This paper attempts to examine how biased the mainstream daily is and in what way it is biased in its coverage by focusing on the news items related to election published during the campaigning period. This study also intends to illustrate how candidates from the ruling coalition and opposition parties had been treated in the newspaper. The campaigning coverage in *The Borneo Post* clearly endorsed the views and interests of the ruling coalition and most of the time the Opposition candidate and party were negatively portrayed.

Key words: Political communication, by-election, media representation

Background

The role of media is considered important in political campaign. This function amplifies during election as the media strive to give accurate, objective and unbiased reports with the hope that the electorate would be well-informed and therefore able to make the correct choices when electing their representatives. In short, having access to information is vital for a healthy and vibrant democracy. Political parties, candidates and campaigners usually try to reach their voters through the media in ‘marketing’ their election manifestos, pledges and promises to the electorate. Candidates or the parties involved in the election often attempt their utmost in ensuring that they are portrayed at their best in the media coverage. Apart from that, the media is also used to counter accusations made by their opponents during the campaigning period.

Objectives

This paper attempts to examine the performance of the Sarawak mainstream media during the Batang Ai by-election. For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on the electoral coverage of an English daily, *The Borneo Post*. This paper intends to determine to what extent the sampled daily had been able to perform its role objectively throughout the brief campaigning period in the by-election.
The overall objective of this paper is to examine the coverage of the Batang Ai by-election in Sarawak in an English daily, The Borneo Post. Specific objectives of this study are to examine the editorial slant of The Borneo Post, particularly in the framing of issues and personalities during campaigning. This paper attempts to examine how biased the mainstream daily is and in what way it is biased in its coverage by focusing on the news items related to election published during the campaigning period. This study also intends to illustrate how candidates from the ruling coalition and opposition parties had been treated in the newspaper.

The scope of this paper has been confined to studying the coverage of the Batang Ai by-election in The Borneo Post. The dates selected for the press coverage are confined to the campaigning period from 29 March 2009 until 7 April 2009. The Borneo Post was chosen as sample as it commanded the highest circulation for the English market in Sarawak. This study employs quantitative content analysis method. Press coverage which was content-analysed during the nine-day campaigning period include news items, features, commentaries and editorial pieces. This method enables us in understanding how issues were reported, sources used, and the prominence given to various issues.

It is not within the scope of this paper to find out to what extent the election coverage in the two local dailies had succeeded in influencing the perceptions and mindset of voters, let alone to swing the votes to the benefit of the ruling party. Also, it is not the intention of this study to evaluate the effectiveness of the mass media in promoting the stance of the ruling party.

Numerous studies carried out on the electoral coverage in the Peninsula mainstream press during the previous general elections (see Mustafa 1990; Wong 2004) have shown clear evidence of a one-sided and a biased coverage. One reason attributed to the biased election coverage in the Peninsula mainstream press is the close relationship between the press and the ruling party.

The Borneo Post

The Borneo Post was established on 5 September 1977 and was incorporated as a company on 28 September 1977. The Borneo Post is published by The Borneo Post Sdn Bhd. The six largest shareholders in The Borneo Post Sdn Bhd, based on documents obtained from the company registered up to 31 April 2009, are See Hua News Holding Sdn Bhd, Wahab Dolah, Mohamad Ali Mahmud, Faridah Hj Satem, Julaihi Hj Mohd Kaka and Noor Tahir. Mohamad Ali Mahmud, is the brother of Sarawak Chief Minister, Taib Mahmudr, who is also one of the company’s directors, a position he held since 2002. The latest circulation figure for The Borneo Post released by the Audit Bureau of Circulations is 81,645 (Press and PR Guide 2009) and is thus far, the leading daily in the State of Sarawak, Malaysia.
Batang Ai By-election
The Batang Ai by-election was necessitated following the demise of Dublin Unting Ingkot, the former Assistant Minister for Agriculture, Youth and Sport on February 24, 2009. The tussle for the seat was between the Barisan Nasional, through Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS). The BN was represented by Malcom Lamoh Mussen, an engineer, to defend the seat whereas the opposition Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) was banking on Jawah Gerang, a five-term former BN parliamentarian. Polling was on April 7, 2009. BN’s Malcolm won by a majority of 1,854 votes when he garnered 3,907 votes against 2,053 votes for PKR’s Jawah Gerang. The last time the opposition won against the BN in Batang Ai was in 1991. Batang Ai, one of two seats under the Lubok Antu parliamentary constituency has 8,006 registered voters, including 43 postal voters. The constituency is made up of Iban (95 per cent), Malay (1.25 per cent) and Chinese (3.75 per cent) (TheBorneo Post, 8 April 2009). Batang Ai is regarded as ancestral home or the heartland of the Ibans in Sarawak.

Theoretical Framework: Media Representation
One pertinent factor that this paper wishes to look into is media representation of the election. For the media, an effective way of representation is through the selective discourses and meanings given to issues and events and this is where analysing the words in the texts is deemed as crucial. As Fairclough (1995: 104) puts it, “The analysis of representational processes in a text, therefore, comes down to an account of what choices are made – what is included and what is excluded, what is made explicit or left implicit, what is foregrounded and what is backgrounded, what is thematized and what is unthematized, what process types and categories are drawn upon to represent events, and so on.”

Cultural theorist and media scholar Stuart Hall (1986: 9) calls the media the “machinery of representation.” In providing a daily representation, the media select and give meanings to people, events, situations and objects and could choose to highlight them either in a positive or negative manner and then presenting them in a neat package for readers and audience.

What gets represented and not represented are also equally influenced by the so-called news values or journalistic values; values which essentially dictate what goes into the media each day, what to be excluded, what to be magnified and what to be down-played or even black out totally. However, there is always a tendency of over representation and under representation as the media may overemphasise on certain people or events but underemphasise on other people or events, giving them little coverage or at worst, make them disappear completely from the media.

As Hall (1986: 9) puts it, “some things, people, events, relationships always get represented: always centre-stage, always in the position to define, to set the agenda, to establish the terms of the conversation. Some others sometimes get represented - but always at the margin, always responding to a question whose terms and conditions have been defined elsewhere: never ‘centred’. Still others
are always ‘represented’ only by their eloquent absence, their silences: or refracted through the glance or the gaze of others.”

This study draws on the representation concept advanced by Hall. Representation, according to Hall (1997) means making meaning. No object, situation or event has a single, certain and fixed meaning until they are being represented. As Hall (1997) sees it, representation captures the process from nothing that is fixed in meaning in the first place to mean something at the end. Representation tries to interpret what the event is about and what is the meaning behind it. Representation is also constitutive of an event, that is to say, representation becomes part of the event.

Findings and Discussions: Quantitative Content Analysis
Based on the quantitative content analysis there were many issues reported in the media during the campaigning period. Socio-economic development issues was ranked the most frequent issue highlighted throughout the nine-day campaigning in the The Borneo Post. Apart from that, other issues were related electoral matters, candidature issue, and land issue. There were a total of 101 news item pertaining to the by-election in the Borneo Post during the campaign period. Barisan Nasional (BN) candidate were quoted three times (2.9 per cent) in the sampled newspaper; whereas Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) candidate was only quoted one time. Sarawak senior Cabinet ministers especially Taib Mahmud, Awang Tengah Ali Hassan and James Jemut Masing. Taib become the most popular source of news when he was quoted ten times by the Borneo Post during the campaign period as he was the chairperson of Sarawak BN. Other politicians quoted were Alfred Jabu anak Numpang, William Mawan Ikom and Daud Abdul Rahman.

The study also found out that, the Sarawak Cabinet members were quoted 25 times (24.7 percent). Another prominent source for journalists during the campaign was the Federal Cabinet ministers dan deputy ministers, including those from Sarawak, like Douglas Unggah, Fadillah Yusuf, Joseph Entulu, Joseph Salang who had been quoted at least once. As compared to Sarawak Cabinet members, the federal Cabinet members were quoted 20 times (19.8 per cent) by the journalists.

Members of Parliament from BN component parties and Opposition party only appeared once respectively. It was also found that The Borneo Post had also allocated space for the leaders and office bearers from Opposition parties, which took up 13 times (12.8 percent) of the total sources of news quoted in the paper.

Other sources were the longhouse headmen and the resident which was quoted three times. Police personnel were quoted eight times (7.9 percent) and members of the Election Commission were quoted six times (5.9 percent) respectively.
News sources

BN candidates were featured predominantly in the newspaper with prominence given to the chairman of Sarawak BN Taib Mahmud, Awang Tengah Ali Hassan and James Masing, the director of election for Batang Ai By Election.

The Opposition candidate was quoted in the story as acknowledging that he was facing an uphill battle against a BN candidate. However, there seemed a little less objectivity in terms of placement of news items as this study revealed that most news on the candidates from the Opposition parties only appeared from page two onwards. Unlike the consistent daily appearance of news stories quoting Barisan members, news on the Opposition did not have such luxury and at times merely existed as filler for the day in the paper. BN news deserved front-page space but not so apparently for stories related to the Opposition candidates.

Page placement of news items is but one of the ways to show the importance and significance attributed to news stories and indirectly the sources used because who the sources are in the news also determines the importance of news items. The convention of journalism is that what appears on the front page is regarded as the top news of the day. These items were treated with bigger font size, and other important news item are placed on the upper fold of the inside pages while the less important ones would be placed at the bottom of the pages. The significance of certain news were further enhanced by utilizing other editorial mechanisms, such as the headlines, photos, the highlighted quotes, and the journalists’ narrative emphases, particularly through framing approach.

There were only nine news items quoting the Opposition, including two placed on the upper fold, including an item which quoted Dominic Ng Kim Ho, a PKR State leader. The news entitled “Ng bemoans flopped PKR online fund drive”. The second item was regarding Jawan’s failure in bringing substantial development to Batang Ai when he was a parliamentarian. Albeit these news were placed on the upper fold, they negative in nature. In fact, that was the reason the news items were highlighted and placed on the upper fold. All other news items attacking PKR which were regarded as negative and damaging to PKR’s reputation and image were placed on prominent pages, especially on the front page.

The editors of Borneo Post were generous in providing space for reports on BN leaders who came all the way from Peninsula and Sabah to assist in the campaigning of their Sarawakian counterparts. BN deputy chairman and Deputy Prime Minister, Tan Sri Mahyuddin Yassin’s and other senior Federal ministers visit like Syed Hamid Albar, Shafiee Afdal’s visit to Sarawak were highlighted extensively. Also given considerable space in the papers were Federal Cabinet Ministers and Deputy Ministers, leaders from other BN component parties outside Sarawak, Members of Parliament, as well as office-bearers of various BN component parties at the branch level. The Opposition candidates too received their own boost of support from their party leaders who had flown in from Peninsula but unlike BN, their presence was less visible in the papers. News items regarding
Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim, Selangor’s Menteri Besar and PKR de facto leader Anwar’s story appeared twice respectively.

No doubt, those in power are headline makers and are privileged in terms of greater space allocation for them in the papers. As BN forms the government of the day, its members are considered “powerful” enough as news sources. Those holding official positions in the government are also considered “powerful” because they are the official news sources for reporters. Reporters rely heavily on officials because their words are deemed as reliable, authoritative and trustworthy. Coincidentally, these officials are also members of BN with some holding fairly high position in the government and the component parties of BN.

Although reporters make the ultimate decision as what to include and what to exclude when quoting their sources, in the case of news stories quoting BN members, what were said were quoted directly by the reporters with no interpretations or evaluations being made, let alone questioning their statements and promises. By virtue of their official position in the government, BN members have come to be regarded as vital news sources for reporters. This explains the immense presence of BN members in the news coverage during the nine-day campaigning period. However, there could be other factors which prompted reporters to choose certain news sources, for instance, the editorial policy of the news organisations which dictated that only certain news sources would be given prominence in the newspapers.

Election issues
Focusing on a positive topic such as socio-economic development not only reflected the positive developments taking place in Sarawak but also gave the impression that BN had worked hard to take care of the needs and interests of the people. It is only when BN is in rule that political stability and unity among the diverse ethnic groups in the State can prevail. BN takes care of the people’s welfare, ensures that the people have a roof over their heads, their health taken care of, their houses are lighted up and the young are given adequate opportunities in education. The Opposition, meanwhile, had focused on several negative issues during campaigning, for instance, hike in oil prices and the Native Customary Land Right (NCR).

Socio-economic development
One main issue played up was socio-economic development. In fact, development appeared to be a prominent theme. Even as early as nomination day on 29 March 2009, PRS president James Masing announced the government’s plan to construct and tar-seal roads in Batang Ai. The government has also announced the building of technical school, a Giat Mara Centre, apart from calling the people to participate in joint venture land project with the private sector (The Borneo Post, 6 April 2009, p. 4). More promises of development projects under minor rural project allocation were announced during
campaign by ministers as a strategy to entice the votes, besides trying to prove that the BN take care for rural folks in Batang Ai.

It was also found out, the government is trying to portray a picture that the government is making a sincere gesture to the Iban community that they have never been marginalized by the BN’s government. Development as suggested by the BN referred to the planned and completed government projects, services rendered by the government and the benefits that the people will reap from the projects and services. The benefits includes basic facilities such as electricity, clean running water and tarred roads, schools and other amenities, these were among the “goodies” of development promised by BN politicians to promote socio-economic upliftment of the people if BN win the by-election.

The rule is simple, to reject BN means to foolishly reject development because only BN could bring tremendous development and progress as evidenced in the reported successful development projects carried out by BN. Socio-economic development remains an issue that is close to the heart of Sarawakians, especially voters in rural Sarawak, thus making patronage politics still relevant. As a State where a large part of its areas still lack many of basic amenities and infrastructure there is still continued dependence on the government to provide basic amenities. And BN candidates were obviously aware that they hit the right note by capitalising on socio-economic development to secure more votes. The politics of basic needs is indeed still relevant in this rural constituency. In fact, since he became the Chief Minister in 1983, the government under Taib’s leadership propagated the concept of politics of development. Politics of development attracted the rural voters because they still need basic facilities and infrastructure.

On the other hand, the Opposition was trying to paint a negative picture about the failure of the government in bringing development projects. The Opposition pointed that the roads in Batang Ai are in indeplorable condition and many longhouses have no electricity when Batang Ai power dam is just nearby. But BN insisted that it will be a matter of time that roads will be tar-sealed and homes get their power supply. BN put the blame on Jawah for failing to bring substantial development under his five-term as a parliamentarian because according to Masing “the former parliamentarian did not lobby hard enough for development.” For Jawah, he refused to accept the blame for not delivering development to Batang Ai from 1987 to 2008, but instead pointed out that if there is anyone to be blamed for the lack of infrastructure projects in Batang Ai, the ministers should be blamed because they have the authority to approve projects (The Borneo Post, 31 March 2009, p. 4).

Electoral matters
The daily also provided extensive reports on electoral matters, presumably for the benefit of the electorate and contesting candidates. Most of the electoral matters were meant to inform voters on voting procedures. For example, the polling hours, the earliest time the election result would be released and reminders to come out to vote. The voters were also assured that there would not be any
cheating in the postal votes. The Election Commission too was not spared from criticisms. It was criticised for failing to maintain an up-to-date electoral list.

A case in point was a voter presumed to be 111 years old and alive during the election had actually passed away 30 years ago (The Borneo Post, 2 April 2009, p.4). It was until members of the Malaysian for Free and Fair Elections (Mafrel) visited the grave of the so-called 111-year-old voter that the Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar strongly denied the existence of phantom voters in the electoral roll. According to Syed Hamid, the existence of names of dead voters was due to the list not being updated by relevant authorities, and not because they were created by BN for the sake of winning the election (Borneo Post, 6 April 2009, p. 5).

**Land**

The current state government under Taib Mahmud has been said to be unsympathetic to the Ibans in terms of its land policy. Land is an important issue in which the rural Ibans are passionate about especially pertaining to the Native Customary Rights (NCR) land. In their campaign, the Opposition had pointed out that NCR landowners have not been benefiting from the land development projects and had accused the Sarawak government for taking away the people’s land. BN had rebuked the Opposition for coming up with such baseless claim, citing examples of how the rural folk have benefited from land projects that have created job opportunities and brought development to the once remote and inaccessible areas in the State.

In explaining the issue of land, the BN candidates were given prominent coverage as compared to the Opposition. There were more reports quoting BN candidates explaining how the opening up of NCR land had benefited the people and that the people should be thankful that such development projects were initiated by the BN government. In short, the coverage also portrayed the BN government as extremely helpful in assisting the rural landowners to turn their idle land into more profitable piece of land which had benefited the landowners, thus uplifting their socio-economic status.

**Candidature**

There were praises and criticisms levelled at the personality and capability of the contesting candidates. For instance, the BN were criticised and questioned in terms of his personal background by the the Opposition. To counter the accusations by the Opposition that he is a ‘yes man’, BN candidate said, he would prove to people that he is not a ‘yes man’ as many of his detractors seem to think he is (The Borneo Post, 6 April 2009, p. 3). According to Mussen Lamoh, he is not a ‘yes man but he is a technically trained person and he has his own mind. Mussen was an assistant director in the State Agriculture Department before he was picked as BN’s candidate.

The dailies, also publish explanations from the president of PRS to justify the selection of that particular candidate such as the confidence and faith in the capability of Malcolm to serve the people.
In a front page news entitled ‘Mussen ‘walks the talk’, says PRS leader”, James Masing described Mussen as a hard working person and promise Museen will deliver. Masing, however, admitted that Mussen is new in politics, thus should not equate him like politicians who have 20 years experience.

The Opposition candidate, Jawah Gerang was also belittled in the electoral coverage. Throughout the campaigning, the Opposition had been accused of making false promises and giving false hopes and was spreading all sorts of propaganda to poison the minds of the people. In addition, the Opposition party was also portrayed as riddled with internal problems and intrigues as well as lack of direction in their struggle, thus, making them less trustworthy and unreliable as compared to the BN.

Criticisms also came from former disgruntled party leaders from Opposition parties who had decided to join BN after realising they had committed “a mistake” and had lost trust in the struggle of PKR. A case in point was the resignation of PKR Julau division chairman Dr Ambrose Labang Jamba and three committee members on front page with the title “Julau PKR collapses” two days before polling (Borneo Post, 6 April 2009). Labang told reporters that they decided to leave PKR because the party would never implement development programmes, especially in rural areas. His resignation from PKR was commented by Taib with the heading ‘Cross-over augurs well for BN’s chances’ which was also published in page three of the paper on the same day.

In contrast, there were endless reports that glorified the good deeds of the BN, and there were also abundant praises for BN candidate from people-on-the-street, community leaders, political leaders and ministers. These people who were interviewed by the news paper painted a good picture of BN on the whole and its candidates in particular, as a caring lot and very much concerned of the well-being of the people.

**Direction of news**

The overwhelming amount of pro-BN news items found in Borneo Post reflected the prominence given to candidates, members and component parties from the ruling coalition. In other words, there was explicit emphasis in the electoral coverage on the actors and activities of the ruling party. It also indicated that the campaigning coverage centred on those who were supportive of the ideas and views of the BN. Such extensive coverage for BN no doubt had made them more visible to readers and hence, voters.

The amount of pro-BN news also revealed that the campaigning coverage was neither independent of BN candidates nor the parties in the BN fold. There appeared to be an inclination to follow and adhere to what was being said by the BN instead of the reporters dictating what to be and not to be reported. In fact, the newspaper appeared to have adhered to the agenda of the contesting candidates, particularly those from the ruling coalition. Another factor contributing to the tremendous amount of pro-BN news was the commentaries, press statements, and editorial pieces, including by Bernama which were very much supportive of the ruling party. Such effusive praises for BN in these
items too had contributed to the increase in the number of pro-BN news. On the contrary, there was little, if not zero of such similar items praising the Opposition candidate being published in the newspaper.

Indeed, the political leaning was clearly in favour of BN was reflected in the direction of news. Indirectly, it showed the biasness in the coverage of the by-election. News direction was also an indication of the editorial stance and determined attempt of the newspapers to portray the ruling party in good light and promote the interests of BN.

Additionally, the direction of news was arguably one way to reflect the media representation of an election campaign which obviously concentrated on everything that had to do with BN. Pro-BN news items outnumbered those of pro-Opposition. Pro-BN news made up 86 percent, while pro-Opposition news accounted for nine percent whereas neutral news commanded only 5 per cent of the news coverage during the by-election.

Conclusion

The campaigning coverage in *The Borneo Post* during the Batang Ai by-election was far from fair and objective. The newspaper was bent on promoting BN’s views and agenda so much so that they were perceived as an instrument of propaganda for the BN. Views and opinions critical of BN were given token space in the papers at best, and at worst, stifled and distorted. It was also through the news reports that the ruling party strived to convince the people to have faith and belief in BN as a moderate party that takes care of the well-being of the diverse ethnic groups in Sarawak. Contrary to the positive image given to BN, the Opposition was projected as a whole as deviant and always going against the grain by hampering developmental efforts and creating disunity as well as instability in the State. It was apparent that the intention of the coverage was to justify the need to vote the BN candidate. The campaigning coverage had also legitimised the interests of the dominant group, that is, ideas and interests of the dominant section were made to be the interests of the majority. This explains why the newspaper chose to give prominence on development achievements and so forth as this would portray the ruling party as being concerned on issues close to the heart of the people.

The continuous transmission and reproduction of dominant ideology in the daily is also very much determined by those who control over the newspapers through ownership and legislations. The mainstream press in Sarawak, including *The Borneo Post* are controlled by individuals or groups closely aligned to the ruling party. Hence, with such close relationship between the press and the State in place, it is hardly surprising that the papers have no choice but to align to the needs and demands of their shareholders.

To recapitulate, the campaign coverage in *The Borneo Post*, it is clear that it endorsed the views and interests of the ruling coalition, making it more-or-less a propaganda tool for the BN. The electoral coverage had glorified the accomplishments of BN and the prospects of better quality of life for the electorate in future should BN be given a fresh mandate in the by-election. On the other hand,
most of the time the Opposition candidate and party were negatively portrayed as deceitful and lack of credibility, thus, making them paled in comparison with the good and credible BN candidate. In short, there were obvious partisan bias, propaganda bias, unwitting bias, and ideological bias in terms of coverage. BN was explicitly and deliberately promoted compared to the Opposition. Negative perceptions about the Opposition party was reinforced. Overall, for The Borneo Post, BN matters more than the Opposition in terms of news selection and placement. Such media representations articulate a particular ideological view about BN and the Opposition.

References

Borneo Post, 1 Mac – 9 April 2009.


The author would like to thank Dr Ahi Sarok and Violet Tay for their contribution in improving this paper.