MEDIA FRAMING: A CASE STUDY OF THE GOVERNMENT TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME (GTP) IN THE STAR FROM 2010 - 2013

Sharon Wilson, Santhidran Sinnappan
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman

Sivachandralingam Sundara Raja, Evelyn Shyamala Devadason, Thirunaukarasu Subramaniam
Universiti Malaya

ABSTRACT

Media has the potential in shaping and reshaping the people’s opinion, behavior and notion on an issue or event. Media acts as gatekeeper and opinion leader in determining what to include and exclude in covering an issue or event they think is prominent in influencing the public. This paper focuses on the media coverage of the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) and the need to inform the public on the various programmes associated with the GTP which stresses on the fact that the programme has the people’s needs in mind and the transformation, holistic in nature affects all of us and it changes everything. The principal objective of the study is to evaluate the extent to which the GTP related news items are viewed as national interest. Information of this project has been covered by the media seeing as the Malaysian media plays a role as purveyors of information for the government. This study, a part of a larger research on the socio economic effects on Malaysian Indians, uses a textual analysis of The Star from 2010 – 2013 with a sample of 69 news items. Because the Malaysian media has an open connection to the government through its role as disseminator of information to the public, the study also tries to identify the selection of stories associated to the GTP which the media finds pertinent and the analysis identifies the various preference of frames and news cluster in terms of news selection.

Field of Research: Media, Government Transformation Programme, Public, Information

1. Introduction

The press and the media are seen as social institutions which yield a great amount of power and influence. They are seen as playing a significant role in this modern society. The image that the media holds brings about different reactions from different categories of society. As a mediator, they build, shape and disseminate information in a world full of abstract and challenges to a society through a method that is comprehensible. Journalists are also educators who disseminate information which is filled with subjects from general to specific which can increase knowledge and open the minds of society. They are also opinion leaders who are able to create sentiments, exact sympathy and instigate actions by millions of readers. Cassidy (2006) categorized journalists’ role as interpreter, disseminator, adversarial and populist, mobiliser. The study explores the various issues the media has highlighted from part of the GTP over the course of inception to the current period and to evaluate the extent at which the media can play a positive role as purveyors of information for the government.

2. Media ownership in Malaysia

Newspapers, whether they are paid newspapers or not, are generally used by the public as a source of information, usually revolving sports, local issues, community events and entertainment news. Media
companies have to tailor the content of the newspapers to ensure it appeals to state, political parties, corporate entities, lobby groups, and civil society groups, while balancing the needs of its customers so that the newspaper sells, as well as to ensure their advertisers can reach the audience with a message on their product or service (McElmurry, 2009).

Malaysia’s mainstream newspapers are largely owned by the government or businessmen and public figures in close relationships with the coalition parties of the government. Although the news media is the main avenue of communication between a government and its people, the Malaysian government appears to be adopting a "government knows best" stance when it comes to the mainstream media. One possible reason is that since Malaysia is a developing nation, the government has to control the mainstream media in the name of ensuring the media does not side track and compromise national development and national security (Anuar, 2007a). What this means is that the government is attributing responsibility to the media to ensure what they publish does not go against the government's plans to maintain social order and ensure the government's development plans go ahead in the name of the people.

2.1 The Star

According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, The Star saw a daily sales of 290,000 as of 2012. This is evident for the paper being the right medium for the government, various community groups and non-government organizations to convey their messages. However, Huaren Sdn Bhd, which is the investment arm of the Malaysian Chinese Assembly (MCA), has a 42% controlling stake in The Star (Siow, 2009). This makes The Star partly controlled by a component party of the ruling coalition, and may have to propagate the agenda and policies of its owners in order to maintain the hegemony of the ruling group (Wang, 2001). Alternatively, The Star may need to be cautious when publishing news articles that express dissent towards the government. Analysis by researchers such as Wang (2001) and Anuar (2007a) have consistently found that The Star have more positive coverage on the BN as compared to coverage on opposition news.

One interesting thing to note though is that on occasion, The Star has more coverage on dissenting news than its rival, New Straits Times (e.g. Anuar, 2007a), but it is still at a low level. Even if it is at a low level, some of the articles may portray the government in a more positive light. A study by Azlan, Rahim, Basri & Hasim (2012) on newspaper coverage on the New Economic Model (NEM) found that one of The Star’s commentary articles on the NEM appeared to address concerns that the proposal report of the New Economic Model lacked detail and explanation. However, the article took on a narrative that served to reassure the reader that the government was indeed performing their duties and paints the Prime Minister and the government in a positive light.

2.2 Government Transformation Programme (GTP)

Transformation refers to the radical change in the form or outward appearance of something or a substantial change in the composition or structure of something. Beginning 2010, the government introduced four pillars – 1 Malaysia plan, Government Transformation Programme, New Economic Policy and the 10th Malaysia Plan. The transformation introduced was to have greater emphasis on getting the people involved in the development process. The governments programme is focused on fighting corruption, reducing crimes, improving living standards, improving rural basic infrastructure, improving urban public transport and improving student outcomes through better education. The GTP in particular was designed to bring all Malaysians to new heights and improve public life in these sectors.

The GTP 2.0 consists of three broad thrusts which include continuity of the initiatives in the first programme such as maintenance of rural basic infrastructure which has been built and measures to fight corruption. Secondly is to expand in the area of education such as the teachers career package where teachers will be evaluated with single evaluation instrument and promoted based on judgment of performance instead of time based. In rural areas water and electrification projects will be part of the infrastructure developments. Thirdly, there will be a new ground breaking initiative to to create a 21st century village to get qualified people to become successful rural based entrepreneurs and an online tracking system for police using the best available technology to do things better. But for the public to understand the GTP the media is the only way information can be passed down. This ‘trickle down effect’ is conducted with many considerations amongst others the selection of news and the framing of this news.

2.3 Framing

The Framing theory was introduced by sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) who explained that the mass media are framed by journalists with the aim of providing a context for understanding information and enables people to locate, perceive, identify and label. Walter Lippmann (1922) suggested that public opinion is based upon the pictures inside people’s heads, which come from media’s framed reality of events in the world. The first stage of framing occurred during the 1920s and 1930s, and dealt with research on World War I propaganda effects and beliefs about the media’s influence on people’s attitudes (Scheufele, 1999). The second stage of framing, which took place from the 1930s to the 1960s, media researchers looked into the importance of personal experience in attitude change because they believed that the media’s major affect was “the reinforcement of existing attitudes” (Baysha & Hallahan, 2004, as quoted by Brunken, 2004). In the third stage, which takes place between the 1970s and 1980s, research was focused on cognitive effects and how prior knowledge of an issue could have mediated the power of frames in a decision-making or evaluative context (Baysha & Hallahan, 2004, as quoted by Brunken, 2004).

Robert Entman (1993) modernized the definition made by Goffman (1974) by saying that framing is a selection of framing some select aspects of perceived reality. Entman (1993) believes that these frames that Goffman (1974) mentioned are manifested by the presence or absence of certain key words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments. The frames also highlight connections among them to promote a particular interpretation (Entman, 2007).

This interpretation or schemata formed in the minds of an individual, enables the person setting the frame to direct how the individual recognizes and uses framed information (D'Angelo, 2002). It is hoped that this could help organize an individual’s world experiences (Kosicki, 1993), reduce the complexity of issues that are difficult to understand and help people understand these facts easily, sensibly and process it efficiently (Kalvas et al, 2012; Lecheler, Vreesse and Slothuus, 2009; Gamson & Mogdiliani, 1989). The frames also act as a tool to advocate certain ideas and encourage certain kinds of audience processing of the texts (Andsager, 2000), therefore shaping their levels of reality (D'Angelo, 2002) and possibly changing their judgements over an issue (Iyengar, 1987). In other words, frames aim to get the target audience to understand, think, feel and make decisions in one way or another over an issue.
Powerful communication agents, including elected officials, interest groups, and lobbyists, create and promote frames with the hopes of planting them in the mass media (Nelson & Oxley, 1999) and limiting the scope of any debate (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). For politicians or policy makers developing policies on controversial issues, framing can be used to sway public opinion in their favour (Andsager, 2000; Entman, 1993). Chong and Druckman (2007) noted that politicians often adopt communication frames used by other politicians, the media, or citizens. This can be done through the media they control, where they can set the agenda for society and create the boundaries within which debate can take place (Andsager, 2000). Besides providing readers with factual or descriptive information on key events and issues, news casts the spotlight of public attention on previously obscure or otherwise undisputed issues (Shin, 2011). With this realisation, it becomes apparent that media sources with political, as well as economic support and influence could have an effect on the opinions of their readers (Cissel, 2012).

The media in general uses frames to help guide their reader to understanding a certain issue (Cissel, 2012). Sometimes, those frames mimic those used by politicians, social activists, other media outlets, or citizens (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Journalists could use a variety of tactics in framing an issue. For journalists, they have to tell a story within a limited time or space, and would therefore use certain frames to simplify and give meaning to events and to maintain audience interest (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

Among the tactics of framing journalists could use include developing rhetoric with a strong appeal or effectively manipulating symbols, such as catchphrases or ideographs-special words or phrases that express public values (Andsager, 2000), as well as incorporating and condensing a set of metaphors, visual images, moral appeals, and other symbolic devices that can be used to draw on a popular culture that they share with their audience (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Some journalists tend to frame their writing in a way that is favorable towards their favoured ideology (Kothari, 2010; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Pan & Kosicki, 1993) or the side regarded as most powerful, popular, and unified (Entman, 2007), while others view their readers as customers, framing their news articles and columns in a way that would appeal to as many people as possible and expanding their readers so the news media can sell space to prospective advertisers (McElmurry, 2009).

Framing research suggests that the media is able to not only tell the public what is important and newsworthy, but also successfully tell the public to a certain extent what opinions, interpretations, and definitions of a controversial issue are most important (Andsager, 2000). In this case the case in point is the Governments Transformation Programme (GTP). This is because people are restricted to only the information available to them from the mass media and other sources, making news framing's role crucial in constructing public opinion (Andsager, 2000). Christian, Ngozi and Kenneth (2012) support this view, saying that the public's lack of awareness, along with their reliance on media for information and decision-making, make them more likely to be influenced by framing. On top of that, the argument made by Chong and Druckman (2007) that the public adopt frames they learn in discussions with other citizens could be the result of citizens being influenced by the frames put in place in news articles that they have read will be discussed by the researchers in a larger study specifically on the GTP impact on the Indian community in Malaysia. This is a view shared by Misener (2012) who said that the manner in which media select, filter, and share the “news” with the public influences our understanding and beliefs relating to that information.

A study done by Faridah, Chang and Kuik(2012) states the use of 18 attributes which were collapsed into five categories in the frame preferences identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and adapted by were used in a more qualitative setting rather than a quantitative one recommended by both groups of
scholars. The categories were (1) responsibility (2) Human Interest (3) Conflict, (4) morality and (5) economic consequence.

3. Methodology & Research Design

Considering the main objective of the research was to analyze the various issues pertinent to the GTP as published by a state owned newspaper, the researchers used a textual analysis to interpret data in terms of categories and themes by deciphering meaning to text. This study, a part of a larger research on the socio economic effects on Malaysian Indians, uses a textual analysis of The Star from 2010 – 2013 with a sample of 69 news items. Although most research on framing used a quantitative approach such as that used by Semetko and Valkensburg (2000) and adapted by Faridah, Chang and Kuik (2012) the researchers developed frames upon analyzing and coding the texts. Articles on the GTP were found from the Star news archive online from 2010 – 2013. 69 news articles specific to the topic being discussed were found from the period of discussion. Categories were then developed and juxtaposed with the six main issues of the GTP as recommended by the government.

4. Findings & Discussion

In 2010, the media highlighted and introduced the various programmes to the public which included the overall context of the GTP and the objectives and aims of the various programmes and its attempts to boost national unity whilst in 2011, the media highlights were to have the people embrace the programme and have it instilled and embedded in their minds focusing on reporting the issue of hardcore poor and the governments focus on the needs of the people and the responses to this. In 2012, there were more issues discussed and more results were made available for the public awareness. This included successes of the programme in terms of reduction of crimes, refocusing the government’s role in businesses and its overriding aim to become a high income developed nation by 2020.

The introduction of the GTP 2.0 was also introduced in 2012 to take on a more robust approach to assisting the people. The first phase of the programme which saw the emphasis of the people being taken into consideration now focused on getting the people involved in the development process. While in 2013, the focus was on the successes and the a greater emphasis on getting the people involved in the development process. In a span of four years there were 69 articles published in The Star (figure 1) which focused on the GTP and programmes relating to the GTP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No of Articles</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Sample size analyzed

The sudden increase in the number of articles (4) in 2011 to (27) in 2012 could be the fact that more diverse projects were being introduced and the government needed to emphasize and assure the public of its plan and the projects in the pipeline. Iyengar (1991) proposed that there are two types of framing, namely episodic framing and thematic framing. Episodic framing is where stories are told from the perspective of an individual person or event, while thematic framing is where stories are told from a broader, societal perspective. It was found that in this case the GTP was reported from both an episodic and a thematic framing The episodic framing were evident when there were column pieces written by Idris Jala, CEO of the Performance Management and Delivery Unit from a first person account and the thematic framing were perspectives given from a broader societal context or a more hard news story account where frames are more clearly identifiable.
4.1 Identifying frames

In terms of identifying the frames extracted from the coverage of the GTP from 2010 – 2013, it was found that there were four major frames which were covered or highlighted. This included the information frame, the affirmation frame, the success frame and the conflict frame.

Information frame refers to the explanation of the process of something or how something works and a focus on exploring policy and its impact. The media (The Star) has played its role in being purveyors of information and has been used as a tool for the dissemination of public policy whilst ensuring that the people are not only made aware of the various issues the government is handling but also to assure the readers that it (the programme) is not just a plan but one that is being put into practice. The media has been consistent in reporting on the GTP’s performance management and delivery unit. The GTP has been highlighted as a holistic development and to cater to a more high income nation.

The affirmation frame refers to the need to re-affirm and assure the audience on the information which was first introduced. This is a reinforcement of existing attitudes. This is seen through the text of articles below that the quotes given by the sources indicate a sense of assurance given to the people and the stress that the programme has been successful and continuous to be a success especially when it is compared to the last 42 years in terms of achievements in infrastructure, poverty and education (April 23rd 2012).

“It is not an unattainable wish, it is something which we have planned carefully”  
(September 16th 2010)

“The government is not in dire straits right now. By all measures its finances are good...”  
(March 19th 2012)

“Be assured we are transforming for the better...”  
(May 7th 2012)

The success frame indicates successes which take a closer look into the veracity of a statement made or information given. This could mean a look at the completion of a project or a venerable positive outcome of the project. The findings also revealed that the implementation of the GTP in terms of policing has been seen as world class towards providing the public with better policing services. Towards the end of 2012, the media had started highlighting projects that have been wrapped up and the amount of money spent and more success stories such as the steady growth of the economy and the reformation of the economy to avoid the pitfalls of a bankrupt nation. Other success stories include the wrapping up of the Economic Transformation Project highlighted on November 27th. This includes aligning various sectors and organizations with the GTP (October 5th 2012). The media text used quoting sources mentioning that the government programmes are “bearing fruit”, “on the right path” and “driving the nation forward” is evident to readers that the programmes are positive and are making headway. The results which show success are also recurring in media reports in 2013. This include “growth at a relatively healthy pace” which interpreted seem to refer to consistency especially in reference to the global economy. At the same time, many global institutions had praised the Malaysian economy which has been driven by the strong domestic consumption brought about by the government transformation programme. “We deserve a pat on the back for our economic programme”(January 6th 2013) mentioned states how global players are looking on to us for our innovative methods and Malaysia have become a comparison to other countries.

The conflict frame discusses the issues or uncovering a distinguishable odds or disagreement in relation to the project at hand. There were some parties which mentioned that the GTP “the global economy
was stuck in a lackluster growth” and it was also stressed that the “opposition cannot give the benefits” (February 7th 2013) (that the government is giving the people).

The media has also highlighted the fact that the GTP will determine the ensuring victory of Barisan National, the ruling political party and this comes after the Penang state government claimed that there has not been any public announcement on the progress of the GTP and that “the promises to the state had not been fulfilled with reference to non progress of the Greater Penang Transformation Programme” (September 14th 2012).The media in the same report highlighted the fact that there’d been no movement by Idris Jala (CEO of PEMANDU) and questioned the reason his promise to the state government was not fulfilled. In response to this on March 19th 2013, the Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak himself made a statement which seem to squash queries on getting the job done by stating “we have kept our promises”

The government officials and statements have also rendered ‘warnings’ through the media such as “the people have been warned against creating drastic change...change requires experience and the good foresight which the top BN leaders have” (March 11th 2013). The comment seem harsh but at the same time comes quite timely as the opposition’s slogan seem to be ‘ubah’ (change) and the general elections were to be held on May 5th.

In short, the press has taken on a decidedly interpretative cast in its presentation of the news. Building stories around assurances, positive profile, and informative details in educating readers was the most common way of framing the news. The fact based approach, through straight news accounts or the narrative stories, accounts for about half as many stories. Building stories around explanation–of how something worked, how it relates to a larger trend or how it evolved to this point–was the most common set of frames. At the same time, the news was also ‘triggered’ by certain elements – explicitly the fact that the news used official sources of the government as ‘the voice of reason’.

4.2 Pertinent Issues highlighted in the media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GTP Issues</th>
<th>Issues Highlighted in The Star</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fighting corruption</td>
<td>Get rid of corruption as a cultural trait (March 15th 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reducing crimes</td>
<td>Crime rates going down..headway in fighting crimes at all levels (August 13th 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improving living standards</td>
<td>Plans are in the pipeline to enhance urban, intercity and rural connectivity (March 2nd 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improving rural basic infrastructure</td>
<td>Blue ocean strategy 4 a platform for rural communities to harness and benefit from value added activities that can help multiply their incomes (June 2nd 2012) GTP 2.0 focus on rural development...(August 21st 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improving urban public transport</td>
<td>IRIS NEXTBUS an application that provides real time public transportation information (February 24th 2013) GTP plans to revive public transportation system (March 19th 2013)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
improving student outcomes

...rural people aware of the importance of education (August 21st 2012)

Literacy and numeracy implicit in the basic right to education (5th Sept 2012)

**Figure 3: Issues relating to the GTP highlighted**

Although the issues discussed seem to cover all the areas of the GTP and although there have been various projects and programmes under the GTP that is obvious and has garnered the attention of the public through the media such as the BR1M, Kedai Rakyat 1Malaysia, Klinik 1Malaysia and Menu Rakyat 1Malaysia - nevertheless, there is much more that the media can do in terms of educating the public on various implementing bodies and sub-programmes such as the Blue Ocean Strategy 4 for rural folk, 1 Azam – the governments initiative to provide assistance in terms of job placements, skills training, agriculture and business, LINUS – the literacy and numeracy screening programmes aimed at all Malaysian children acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills after three years of mainstream primary education, 1M4U and DRe1M for youths in the various National Key Economic Areas and small business opportunities such as TUKAR amongst others.

5. Conclusion

There has been a great debate about the apparent power of the news media to cause interventions. The researchers agree with the literature that news makers ‘read’ political events in a particular way. Rather than assuming that the news media influences or determines what governments do, for those who adhere to this position maintain that the media is influenced by government and government policy and this is especially true with the Malaysian mainstream media. Common to this is the fact that there is a tendency to treat the media as transmitters of other players messages not as originators of policy debates. But the reality of it is the fact that as institutional players the media construct and promote unique frames of their own as well as a conduit for the dissemination of other players frames. By selectively choosing to cover one side or both sides of an issue, putting forth their own interpretation, simplifying events or stories or by simply allocating greater coverage to one issue over another, the media has and will always act as gatekeepers, advocates and interpreters of political themes and information.

In conclusion, as mentioned by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) in the literature, it is clear that communication agents promote frames by planting them in the mass media to avoid or limit debates but as mentioned by Callaghan and Schnell (2001), Gamson (1992), Iyenger (1991) amongst others and concurred by this research, the media draws story patterns for their readers and cognitively serve to construct the public debate, influence readers level of information and attributes public responsibility. The media shapes how issues are highlighted either directly or through the choice of which players messages to highlight, both of which were present in this case. In order for the GTP 2.0 to work the media has to be more pro-active in disseminating information to the public through stressing continuous initiatives

6. References


