

Malaysian Newspaper Discourse and Citizen Participation

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Abstract

Newspapers are a particularly important tool for the communication of government agenda, policies and issues to the general public. An informed public makes for better democracy and active citizen participation, with citizens able to make well-informed decisions about the governance of their nation. This paper observes the role of Malaysian mainstream newspapers in the facilitation of citizen participation to exercise their political rights and responsibilities through a critical discourse analysis on newspaper coverage of the New Economic Model (NEM), a landmark policy of the Najib Administration. It is revealed that Malaysian newspapers carry an ideology that depicts the government and the elite in positions of power. The government, the Prime Minister, the NEM and the NEAC report were foregrounded and positively highlighted. Although many of the articles contained calls for the people to prepare and support the NEM, issues pertaining to the people and the importance of the support of the people were frequently being backgrounded or left out of the newspapers. News reporting should facilitate understanding of government agenda, because the news media is a main avenue of communication between a government and its people. The failure of the press to inform, communicate and stimulate citizen participation among the people could very well prove to be damaging toward the credibility of the local press. The mainstream news press should provide access and support citizen participation by recognising that they are a valuable resource for citizen decision-making and for democracy.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis, Topicalisation, Lexical choices, New economic model, Political citizenship

1. Introduction

The mass media play an important role in the communication between a nation's government and its citizens. Newspapers are a particularly important tool for the communication of government agenda, policies and issues to the general public. An informed public makes for better democracy and active citizen participation, with citizens able to make well-informed decisions about the governance of their nation. This paper observes the role of Malaysian mainstream newspapers in the facilitation of citizen participation in exercising their political rights and responsibilities.

Isin and Wood (1999) describe citizenship as a combination of a set of cultural, economic and symbolic practices merged with civil, political and social rights and duties. According to Faulks (2000), the concept of citizenship not only concerns the individualistic rights of the citizen, it also entails responsibility in the form of duties and obligations that a citizen must perform for the society as a collective. "Political citizenship" as coined by Marshall (2009, p. 149) describes a citizen's right and responsibility to "participate in the exercise of political power" through active involvement in shaping governmental institutions.

2. Citizen participation

According to Nagel (1987), citizen participation is "citizen action that influences or seeks to influence policy decisions" (cited by Mohd Aizi, Shahizan and Mohd Syakiran, 2011, p. 5). These influencing actions can be either direct or indirect (Richardson, 1983). Indirect citizen participation is in the form of sharing of opinions, organisation of demonstrations, and indirect correspondence with political representatives. Direct participation on the other hand involves direct mutual discussions with appointed officials. Barber (1969) attributes levels of citizen participation to three interdependent key elements: citizen motives, opportunities and resources. The author states that these elements may both support and compensate for one another; a citizen may lack in motive but his/ her access to resources may prompt participation. In turn, a citizen who possesses the motives to participate in policy decisions may actively seek the relevant opportunities and resources.

This paper focuses on the resource and opportunity elements of citizen participation. Barber (1969) describes resources as the knowledge, skills and monetary resources that the citizen has access to and opportunities as the external barriers – laws, government policies, and other matters of convenience – that limit or encourage citizen participation. Knowledge here refers to how the citizen has been educated to know what and how they can participate politically. Although Barber (1969) acknowledges that most useful political knowledge comes from information sources from within interpersonal networks, basic political knowledge is usually instilled at the tertiary level of education and cultivated through the press and the media. It is therefore suffice to say that the press and the media are indispensable tools toward citizen participation, acting as sources of information imperative to citizen decision-making and a means for the public to keep at pace with government agenda and vice versa.

3. Malaysian press and freedom

Extant literature in media sociology suggests that the media are vehicles for social control and that the power groupings in society govern the activities of the media (Viswanath and Demers, 1999). Indeed, social control is implemented through the control of information and knowledge made available to society. News media has been attributed with such power as through topic selection and specific reconstructions of social and political events, news media is able to identify, define and articulate reality as defined by the dominant power groups (van Dijk, 2008).

Used as a tool for democracy, freedom of speech and of the press, newspapers allow for the protection and advocacy of citizen rights through critical surveillance of the government and its activities. Freedom of the press in Malaysia, however, is suppressed by constraints on freedom of expression permitted by the Constitution. In line with the theory of social responsibility in policies of the press, the government of Malaysia permits freedom of expression though this right "must be balanced against the private rights of others and against vital social interests" (Gauthier, 1999). Mohd Azizuddin (2004) argues that the authoritarian theory of the press may be more suitable in analysing the Malaysian press as the media are subject to licensing and are restricted by specific laws that obstruct criticism of the government. The author further suggests that the media has been manipulated to offer flattering coverage of the government for its survival and not for public purposes, based on the fact that 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.

4. Critical Discourse Analysis

This study takes on a critical approach to discourse analysis, namely Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) employed in the works of Fairclough and Wodak (1997) and van Dijk (1987). CDA seeks to interpret discourse in terms of how and why discourses are constructed the way they are. Van Dijk (2008) views discourse not only as a reflection of existing social structures, but where social structures are produced, reproduced, reconstructed, confirmed, legitimised or resisted. Hence the critical analysis of discourse acknowledges the larger socio-political sphere within which the discourse is situated. Critical approaches to discourse typically aim to prove by analysis that discourse is rarely neutral or free of ideologies. There are many approaches to CDA that are both theoretically and analytically varied. Van Dijk (2008) in his attempt to construct a theoretical framework of CDA discusses the link between micro and macro levels of analysis. For example, language use and communication of the micro level may reinforce larger ideologies of power and/or societal inequality which are of the macro level.

The author further suggests that discourse has "mind control" properties as recipients of discourse "tend to accept beliefs, knowledge and opinions" from sources they perceive as "authoritative, trustworthy or credible" (i.e. the media) (van Dijk, 2008 p. 92). Recipients of discourse are also inadvertent receivers of discourse in everyday situations and in some cases do not have access or exposure to discourses that carry alternative beliefs or values. For this reason, discourse and its structures inherently define mental representations of events in peoples' minds. In simpler terms, discourse shapes what people think about and how they think about it. The purpose of CDA is to unpack the power relations and ideologies contained within news media, political debates and interviews that may be perceived as natural but have actually naturalised over time.

This study utilised critical discourse analysis to analyse 26 news reports covering the launch of the New Economic Model (NEM) framework from two Malaysian English language newspapers on March 31 2010. Discourse analysis is an analysis of "patterns of language across texts as well as the social and cultural contexts in which the texts occur" (Paltridge, 2006, p. 1). According to van Dijk (2008: 85) critical discourse analysis "primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context". The structures in discourse may be analysed by observing a variety of different discursive strategies utilised in the text.

In this study, the 26 articles were analysed with a focus on topicalisation, lexical choice and quotes used to describe and present the New Economic Model to the general public. Paltridge (2006) defines topicalisation as the placement of a topic at the beginning of a sentence to "indicate what it is 'about'." (p. 185). Topicalisation analysis allows for the revelation of beliefs, priorities and presumptions that underlie texts thus making it possible to uncover the issues foregrounded (or backgrounded) in the text, how they are slanted and how they influence reading. Lexical choice is the way in which a writer classifies and categorises by word usage. Meaning is constructed explicitly and implicitly through the use of words, and differs according to context and source. In a study of the portrayal of lesbians and gays in British public discourse (Morrish, 1996), lexical choice in newspaper reports projected homosexuality as *destructive* and *corruptive*. Quotations and sources of information are an example of discursive strategies utilised to influence reader perceptions toward events in news reports. Teo (2000) in his study on racism in the news, analysed quotation patterns to perform a general characterisation of the newspaper discourse. Only articles released immediately after the announcement of the New Economic Model were analysed as this first wave of news positions the issue in the mind of the reader.

The Malaysian government under the leadership of the sixth Malaysian Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, proposed the implementation of a New Economic Model (NEM) to improve the people's quality of life. The NEM details several economic SRI's or Strategic Reform Initiatives in areas such as public service and the private sector that are anticipated to transform Malaysia into a high-income nation by the year 2020. One of the enabling actions necessary to instigate the strategic initiatives of the NEM is to prepare the people of Malaysia to "support deep seated changes in policy directions" (National Economic Advisory Council 2010, p. 31). The NEM will apply drastic changes to national policy, targeting long-term benefits and the people may at first experience economic hardship before the benefits of the NEM could be felt.

Part 1 of the New Economic Model report was released by the National Economic Advisory Council (NEAC) in March of 2010. This report detailed the current Malaysian economic scenario and the goals, strategies and outcomes of the proposed New Economic Model. Two groups were identified as the major beneficiaries of the NEM – business organisations and the people of Malaysia at large. Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak made public the NEM framework in his keynote address at the Invest Malaysia conference held in Kuala Lumpur in March of 2010.

The subsequent news reports pertaining to the launch of the NEM in two Malaysian English language newspapers, *The Star* and *The New Straits Times* dated March 31, 2010 were chosen for analysis. There were a total of 26 articles reporting the launch of the NEM. These news reports were chosen as they represented an issue of national policy relevant to the citizen and citizen participation.

5. NEM in the newspapers

5.1 Topicalisation

Topicalisation at the sentence level accentuates some information while disregarding others. Rankema (2004) refers to this process as “staging” where information is either foregrounded and made the main focus or backgrounded within a sentence. Topicalisation of a subject in a sentence often indicates that the sentences following it will continue to discuss the subject at hand. A review of sentence topicalisation observes that 25 of the articles were focused on the role of the government, the NEM and its policies, opinions of politicians and/ or public figures regarding the government and the NEM or the National Economic Advisory Council (NEAC) with little or no reference to the people of Malaysia. Smith (2003) states that this partial focus is not uncommon in informational types of discourse however it is arguable that the foregrounding of those in power and/ or attributed power disregards other parties involved and directly affected by the implementation of the NEM. An example of such is shown in Table 1.

<Insert Table 1 Here>

Sentence topicalisation indicated that the Prime Minister, the government and the NEAC report were subjects of importance in the article. The people of Malaysia, whom the NEM would directly affect, were largely backgrounded in the text.

The topicalisation of those in positions of power inhibited reader engagement as most of the articles were written only to inform the reader of past and future achievements of the government, government action, NEM and NEAC action and not of what the Malaysian people would obtain, how they would benefit nor how they will be affected thus distancing the reader from active participation as political citizens.

A notable exception is the article “Embrace change to prosper, Malaysians urged” (*The Star*, 31 March: 2) where the general public were explicitly addressed to be open to the changes that the nation would confront as a result of the NEM. However, again, the information provided was either vague or incomplete. In short, Malaysians are left to wonder on how to embrace the change.

5.2 Lexical choice

The news reports on the NEM were predominantly made up of two categories: news that described the current Malaysian economic environment; and news that sought to describe the NEM and the prospective opportunities it would bring. An observation of lexical use – vocabulary and terminology – used in the description of these two categories was conducted to assess how the news was “framed” (see Johnson and Avery, 1999; Paltridge, 2006).

Seven news reports focused on the description of the current Malaysian economic environment. These news reports contained hyperboles such as “*Malaysia had little option*”, “*...increasingly left behind...*”, “*...smeared Malaysia’s lustre...*”, “*...not in an enviable position...*”, “*...steadily eroded...*”, “*...too difficult...*”, “*...downward spiral...*”, “*...painful possibility of stagnation...*”, “*Not enough...*”, “*...not producing...*”, “*losing*”, and “*failed*” to describe Malaysia’s current economic environment, portraying the economic state of the country to be one in dire need of reform. Lexical choice here reveals an urgency for the reader to believe the current economic environment to be somewhat undesirable or inadequate.

Generalisations occurred in articles with references to the people of Malaysia, the current economic environment and the NEM where the word “Malaysia” was used in reference to the people, the country and/ or the government. Generalisations are commonly used as a means for reporters to provide concise accounts of news events but in turn the repetition of a generalisation hints at the underlying ideologies that motivate the generalisations. The word “Malaysia” as used in the news reports has grouped the people, the country and the government into one entity, creating no separation between the government and the individual as a political citizen with a perspective of his/ her own. This created the sense that the reader has been spoken for, that they are being told what to believe and are not free to decide for themselves. An example of this is shown in Table 2 below.

<Insert Table 2 Here>

References to the people of Malaysia are written in either a vague, impersonalised or incomplete manner that distanced the reader from connecting to the text. Who is the “Malaysia” that is referred to in the article?

The NEM and its prospective opportunities were the main focus in a total of 19 news reports. The explicit and repetitive use of words and phrases like *meeting needs*, *raising income levels*, *quantum leap*, *fairer and more equitable distribution of wealth*, and *defining moment* signal that the NEM was largely portrayed as a saviour that would liberate Malaysia's economy from its grim state. Terms such as *affirmative action*, *rent-seeking*, *patronage*, *fiscal deficits* and *knowledge base infrastructure* were used repeatedly across different news reports to communicate the key particulars of the NEM to the readers. The use of these terms presupposes that the general public possess existing knowledge which they can refer and contribute to through the reading of the news reports about the NEM. The terminology used in the description of the NEM limited the audience to a particular group within which the terms were understood. By making presuppositions on reader knowledge, the writers have alienated members of the general public who do not have a contextual understanding of the language or terms that are used in the news reports with reference to the NEM. For example, in the four articles that explicitly described "renewed affirmative action policies", readers would first have to understand what affirmative action was and have prior knowledge on the current affirmative action policies in order for them to comprehend that the "renewed affirmative action" reported would make significant contributions toward creating equal rights and opportunities among the people of the nation. Many of the benefits of the NEM were also reported in the form of statistics or terminology that could have posed as a barrier to lay person understanding. These barriers created a distinction between those who understood the information presented and those who did not, suggesting that the knowledge was meant only for those directly involved in the discourse and was not relevant to those who did not understand it.

5.3 Quotation patterns

Analysis of the texts revealed a significant use of quotations from elitist members of society to support the information reported in the news articles. Quotes in newspaper articles serve to maintain reader interest and to provide factual evidence to the news report. According to Teo (2000) the reliance on legitimised sources of information creates a situation within which the powerful are further empowered, their position and prominence in society enhanced, and the powerless are silenced. News reports on the NEM largely quoted corporate, expert or authoritative figures from the government and from the industry. Of the 26 articles written about the New Economic Model, 6 directly quoted the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. This is hardly surprising as the prime minister had presented the key note address that delivered the announcement and details of the New Economic Model. 7 of the articles were news reports specifically reporting the statements of 23 public figures regarding the NEM. In these news reports, the sources predominantly supported the implementation of a New Economic Model with limited criticisms.

Many of the quotes from government sources were surface quotes that praised the prime minister for his efforts to bring the nation forward and stressed how imperative it was for all Malaysians to cooperate and support the NEM. The quotes, however, did not contain justifiable reasons why the support of the people was needed nor did they provide any insight to the issues at hand.

The voice of the general public was unrepresented save for one commentary article which addressed concerns that the proposal report of the New Economic Model lacked detail and explanation (The Star article 7). This article however, 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 by highlighting that "the Prime Minister had actually asked for their participation and feedback in the formulation of the NEM itself" and "the Prime Minister wants to ensure everyone has a say before the plan is implemented". This commentary piece further advocates the policy and the government and does not voice any real issues that could be of concern to the general public. Table 3 shows the quotation pattern in the news reports.

<Insert Table 3 Here>

The findings of the critical discourse analysis as shown above have revealed that Malaysian newspapers indeed carry an ideology that depicts the government and the elite in positions of power. Topicalization, lexical use and quotations were among the discursive strategies that were analysed to unpack the power structures and underlying ideologies contained within the news reports. Sentence topicalisation was observed as an indication of what issues or subjects were made the focus of a particular news report thus collectively signifying the issues that were made the main focus by the newspapers themselves. The government, the Prime Minister, the NEM and the NEAC report were foregrounded and positively highlighted. Although many of the articles contained calls for citizens to prepare and support the NEM, issues pertaining to the people and the importance of the support of the people were frequently being backgrounded or left out of the text.

An analysis of the lexical choices in the news reports found that many of the terms and concepts reported required that the reader have some background knowledge or an invested interest in economic issues to be able to engage in the text. The discourse inhibited layperson participation by inadvertently limiting the ease of access of the information. Lexical choices also indicated that the current economic situation and the potential benefits of the NEM were dramatised. Concepts discussed in the news reports were vague and/ or incomplete, further restraining layperson understanding in the way that they were presented. The quotation pattern of the news reports showed a tendency for the media to seek comments and opinions from public figures and elitist members of society even though most of these quotes lacked depth and offered little insight into the NEM or the issues at hand.

It may be perceived that the purpose of the news reports themselves were primarily informative and served to educate the public of the government's agenda and policies, however it can be argued that the announcement of Part 1 of the NEM report served to collect public feedback on future action plans involving the nation's economic status and an informed public was crucial to wholesome public feedback. As proved by the analysis of initial news reports, at the very onset, news reports had already positioned or "framed" the NEM in a particular way hereby shaping and controlling citizen access and opinion toward the issue, thus limiting citizen knowledge resources and opportunity to participate.

6. Conclusion

This study was undertaken to assess the conditions for citizen participation in Malaysian newspaper discourse. Barber (1969) notes that citizen knowledge resources are an important element in evoking citizen participation. Through a critical discourse analysis of news reports covering an important government policy announcement, it was found that Malaysian newspaper reports restrict citizen participation by reinforcing existing power structures in the Malaysian society. The people, through newspapers, are pacified by being told how to think and feel about current policy decisions and are constantly being barraged with messages that praise and flatter the government. It would appear that the Malaysian government has conferred a state-definition of political citizenship, one where the citizen is made to believe that they may hear and be heard, provided that it is what the government wants heard and what the government wants to hear.

News reporting should facilitate understanding of government agenda, because the news media is a main avenue of communication between a government and its people. In the words of Teo (2000) "the media also has the power to resist and challenge, instead of merely reinforcing and reproducing, the social dominance of the elites". Malaysian citizens, recognising that the mainstream media are biased in favour of the government, are seeking alternative sources of information that may or may not be credible. The failure of the press to inform, communicate and stimulate citizen participation among the people could very well prove to be damaging toward the credibility of the local press. A shift in journalistic habits needs to be made to allow for citizen comprehension and participation in government policy-making. The mainstream news press should provide access and support citizen participation by recognising that they are a valuable resource for citizen decision-making and for democracy. A people enriched by knowledge are a people better equipped to enrich their nation.

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Table 1. Example of topicalisation in a news report under analysis

Bold New Way (The New Straits Times, 31 March 2010)
Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak yesterday pledged...
Najib's pledge was loudly applauded...
In his keynote address...
From the NEAC's assessment, Malaysia had...
The first part of the NEAC report...
The report details...
Najib outlined Malaysia's feat...
"As a government, and as prime minister...
"Indeed, the work we have done...
Najib noted that amid signs of the economy recovering...
"Do not be fooled. We need a new way of doing things...
Najib said although past policies...
Malaysia could no longer depend...
Najib also spoke of the need for continuous improvement...
"We must also recognise that some policies...
The government, for one, was assessing...

Table 2. Example of lexical choice in a news report under analysis

Bold New Way (The New Straits Times, 31 March 2010)
...economic reforms would take Malaysia out of the middle-income trap...
...Malaysia had little option but to institute tough economic reform policies...
The government will gather feedback from the public before formulating firm policies...
...impediments that have smeared Malaysia's lustre as an investment destination...
...Malaysia's feat in weathering the recent global economic downturn...
...our aspirations for Malaysia and the Malaysian people go far beyond...
...we must act now to position Malaysia for the future...
...create the high-value economy that Malaysia required...
Malaysia could no longer depend on...
...new strategic industries where Malaysia had expertise in.

Table 3. Quotation patterns of news reports under analysis

News Reference	Source of Quotes/ Data
'They are needed measures' The New Straits Times (2010, p. 6)	Datuk Nicholas Zeffreys, President, The American Malaysian Chamber of Commerce Paul Hoff, FTSE managing director for Asia-Pacific Datuk Seri Nazir Razak, Chief Executive Officer, CIMB Group Datuk Shahril Shamsuddin, Executive Vice-chairman, Sapuracrest Petroleum Bhd.
Full details by third quarter of the year The New Straits Times (2010, p. 8)	Tan Sri Amirsham Aziz, Chairman, The National Economic Advisory Council (NEAC) Khair Mirza, Senior Analyst, Maybank Investment Bank Datuk Seri Idris Jala, minister in the Prime Minister's Department and Chief Executive Officer of the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU) Datuk Seri Stanley Thai, Executive Chairman and Group Managing Director, Supermax Corp Bhd
MCA heartened by NEM The Star (2010, p. 8)	Datuk Seri Dr. Chua Soi Lek, President, Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) Datuk Seri Ng Yen Yen, Vice President, MCA Datuk Dr Wee Ka Siong, MCA Youth Chief
Policies must be properly implemented, says Ramon The Star (2010, p. 9)	Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, Chairman, Centre for Public Policy Studies Tan Sri Prof Dr Khoo Kay Kim, Academician
Leaders hail promise of prosperity The Star (2010, p. 14)	Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal, Rural and Regional Development Minister Datuk Seri Maximus Ongkili, Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Seri Rais Yatim, Information, Communications and Culture Minister Datuk Ahmad Shabery Cheek, Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Ahmad Maslan, Deputy Minister, Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Shahrir Samad, former Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Datuk Dr Norraesah Mohamad, economist Khairy Jamaluddin, UMNO Youth Chief
Hua Zong hopes new model will fulfil aspirations of 1Malaysia The Star (2010, p. 15)	Tan Sri Pheng Yin Huah, President, Federation of Chinese Associations (Hua Zong)
Minister: Sarawak is on track The Star (2010, p. 16)	Datuk Amar Abang Johari Tun Openg, Housing and Urban Development Minister