

COVERING GALAS AND BATU SAPI BY-ELECTIONS: FRAMING BY CHINESE NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors report the outcome of a thorough analysis of how Malaysian Chinese newspapers—Sin Chew Daily and Nanyang Siang Pau—reported the two last Malaysian by-elections in 2010, which are the Galas and Batu Sapi by-elections. These two by-elections were important because their results were considered as significant indications of the people's confidence in the ruling coalition and the Prime Minister Najib's promises to reform since the political tsunami in 2008. The outcomes of these two by-elections were also seemed as indications of the people's voting pattern for the upcoming 13th Malaysian general election, which must be held by 2013. The newspapers were analysed with the objectives of determining: (1) the pattern of coverage; (2) the predominant news sources used by the newspapers; (3) the news frame used by the newspapers; and (4) the slant of the news articles. Findings show that both of the newspapers devoted a huge percentage of its attention to getting straight news stories from Barisan Nasional leaders, while episodic frame made the strongest showing on the

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pages of the papers. *Sin Chew Daily* and *Nanyang Siang Pau* were also found to have been neutral towards the parties and candidates contesting in the by-elections.

Keywords: news reporting, political communication, by-elections, vernacular newspaper, framing analysis

INTRODUCTION

Elections are considered the cornerstone of democracy. Since gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia has held its general elections every five years. The first general election was held in 1959, and since then until the 12th general election in March 2008, *Barisan Nasional* (BN) or the National Front has continued to rule the country. However, the 12th Malaysian general election witnessed such a drastic change that it has been described as a "political tsunami." The BN coalition suffered an unprecedented defeat by losing its two-third majority while the primary peninsular opposition parties—*Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) or People's Justice Party, Democratic Action Party (DAP), and *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party—posted remarkable gains.

However, election fatigue has become a common complaint in Malaysia lately because there had been too many by-elections in the country. There was a total record of thirteen by-elections since the 12th general election, which was held on 8 March 2008, by the end of year 2010. The former Election Commission (EC) chairman, Abdul Rashid Rahman, who served with the commission for 27 years, said: "There had never been more than a dozen by-elections during a single term" (Ooi 2010). A by-election is held in the respective constituency when a Member of Parliament (MP) or state assembly dies, resigns or is disqualified from holding a seat. Significantly, by-elections reflect Malaysia's parliamentary democratic process, which grants people the right to choose their leaders to represent them at the federal or state level. However, there is an exception if the vacancy occurs when the tenure for the current Parliament or state assembly is less than two years, where the seat is simply left vacant until the next general election. Some politicians are calling for new rules so that by-elections can be avoided in the future. They suggested that parliamentary or state assembly seats that are vacated through resignation or death could be simply filled by the party already holding power in the constituency (Ooi 2010).

Nevertheless, by-elections may serve a critical function as tests for political party support. Victory in a by-election can substantially boost leadership credibility and party popularity, while a poor performance can lead to the demoralisation of party activists, leadership splits and internal party recriminations (Moten 2006). Hence, the by-elections after the 2008 electoral upset were all the more vital and politically significant because they served as crucial tests of BN's political hegemony.

The two last by-elections in 2010 were held on the same day. The Galas (Kelantan) state seat fell vacant after the death of its MP Che Hashim Sulaima due to colon cancer in September 2010. The Batu Sapi (Sabah) state seat also became vacant following the death of its MP Edmund Chong Ket Wah in October 2010 due to a road accident. Subsequently, the EC announced 4 November 2010 to be the date of by-election for the two seats.

THE GALAS AND BATU SAPI BY-ELECTIONS

The Galas seat was contested by Abdul Aziz Yusof from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Zulkefli Mohamed from PAS. UMNO is the biggest party within the ruling coalition BN, while PAS is the opposition party that is often singled out as the biggest rivalry for UMNO in winning over the support of the Malay-Muslims in the country. The Galas seat had traditionally been an UMNO-led constituency, and was ceded by a narrow margin to PAS in 2008. There was a speculation that the Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak would be encouraged to call for an early general election if Abdul Aziz Yusof convincingly regains the seat for BN (Ooi 2010).

The Batu Sapi seat was a contest between Linda Tsen Thau Lin from the *Parti Bersatu Sabah* (PBS) or Sabah United Party, Ansari Abdullah from PKR and Yong Teck Lee from the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP). Tsen is the widow of the former Batu Sapi MP Edmund Chong Ket Wah and PBS was a component party of BN. PKR is an opposition party led by Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy Prime Minister of the country. Yong Teck Lee is the president of SAPP as well as the former Chief Minister of Sabah. SAPP used to be a BN component party but it broke away from the ruling coalition in 2008. The contest for the Batu Sapi parliamentary seat was the first in the East Malaysian state of Sabah since the 2008 general election and was assumed to give some sign of how the state has been affected by changes in the power balance in West Malaysia (Ooi 2010).

Both the Galas and Batu Sapi by-elections saw victories by the BN coalition. The victories were considered a significant indication of the people's renewed confidence in the ruling coalition and the Prime Minister Najib's promises of reforms. The victories gained by the BN in these two by-elections were also seemed as an indication of the people's voting pattern for the upcoming 13th Malaysian general election, which must be held by 2013.

POLITICS AND THE MEDIA IN MALAYSIA

Most people have a very limited direct contact with politicians and therefore get most of their political information from the media. Election coverage arouses people's interests and informs them about the candidates' background, issue stances and campaign performances. It thus allows potential voters to ascertain which candidates or parties can better represent them. Media coverage also generates interpersonal political discussions (Lee 2010). On the other hand, it is claimed that the media does not transmit political messages neutrally; rather, they actively intervene in political communication processes and frame the news in certain ways (Esser 2008; Stromback and van Aelst 2010). Therefore, scholars assert that it is critically important to examine the content of mediated political communication because such information may be used as the basis for political knowledge, attitudes and behaviours (Fox et al. 2007).

In addition, it is also noteworthy that the pattern of political communication and formation of public opinions are strongly influenced by the structure of mass communication. Media freedom in Malaysia is heavily curtailed by legislation and ownership (Netto 2002; Wang 2001; Rodan 2005; Nain 2000). Various laws such as the Printing Presses and Publication Act, Internal Security Act, Official Secret Act, Sedition Act, and Communication and Multimedia Act allow the government to impose prior restraints on publication, post-publication punishments and penalties for the acquisition of official information. Nonetheless, the government has recently announced that the Internal Security Act and Sedition Act would be repealed and replaced with new acts.

The structure of media ownership in Malaysia is directly and indirectly controlled by the government or government-linked individuals. *Radio Televisyen Malaysia* (RTM) has been owned and controlled by the government since its inception. Media Prima is an investment arm of UMNO and it owns *News Straits Times*, *Business Times*, *Malay Mail*, *Berita Harian*,

Harian Metro, *Shin Min Daily News*, TV3, NTV7, 8TV, TV9, Fly FM and Hot FM. Besides, *Utusan Malaysia* and *Kosmo!* are published by Utusan Melayu (M) Berhad, which is also related to UMNO (Netto 2002; Tan and Zawawi 2008). The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) also control a substantial part of the mainstream media. MCA, through its official holding company, Huaren Holding Sdn Bhd, owns *The Star*, RedFM 104.9 and 988 (ibid). There are two Tamil newspapers in Malaysia – *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysia Nanban* and their ownership rests mainly in the hands of MIC president Samy Vellu and his wife (Brown 2005; Wang 2001).

Business tycoon Vincent Tan, a close associate of the former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir and other BN leaders, owns *The Sun* and MiTV (Brown 2005; Wang 2001). The All Asia Television and Radio Company (ASTRO) is owned by Ananda Krishnan and Tunku Mahmud Besar Burhanuddin. It has also been revealed that Krishnan has a close relationship with Mahathir and was therefore able to secure a media license (Mohd Sani 2005; Brown 2005).

Nevertheless, McDaniel (2002) found that the Chinese-language newspapers in Malaysia are relatively more independent when compared to their Malay- and English-language counterparts. *Sin Chew Daily*, *Guang Ming Daily*, *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *China Press* are owned by yet another business and media tycoon Tiong Hiew King, while *Oriental Daily* is owned by Lau Hui Kang (Tan and Zawawi 2008).

In regards to the close media-state partnership in Malaysia, Wong (2004) addressed that such relationship would influence the journalists to engage in self-censorship in order not to offend the government. It cultivated a culture of fear – starting with journalists and other writers and spreading to the publishers or broadcasters, distributors and even the public at large when confronted with anything that smacks of the slightest critical commentary on the government. Furthermore, Anuar (2005) criticised that the mainstream Malaysian media contributed to the erosion of the Malaysian electorate's democratic right to information.

Today, newspapers in Malaysia could reach 54 percent of the population (Selva 2010). The structure of newspapers in Malaysia is strongly influenced by the multi-lingual nature of the nation's populations and portrays its pluralistic nature. Newspapers are published in different languages to cater for the respective major ethnic groups. There are currently 51 newspapers in Malaysia, and 35 of them are published in Peninsular Malaysia while 16 are

published in East Malaysia (Selva 2010). By language, 16 are published in English, 13 in Bahasa Malaysia, 18 in Chinese and 3 in Tamil. Bahasa Malaysia dailies reach 46.5 percent of Malaysian population, and this is followed by English dailies (28.7 percent), Chinese dailies (24.1 percent) and Tamil dailies (0.7 percent).

The readers of newspapers learn about issues of significance to their community and how much importance to attach to the matters, based on the amount of coverage given to them (Muthalib and Wong 2002). Scholars found that in Malaysia, the vernacular newspapers play a central role in shaping the political and social reality because the editors and journalists are usually members of the community elite. The vernacular newspapers also have different approaches to problems because each ethnic group has a different living standard and economic status (Ooi 2006; Khoo 2000; Kua 2002; Mohd Noor 2005).

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objective of this study is to analyse the coverage of the Galas and Batu Sapi by-elections by the Malaysian Chinese newspapers. Using a framing analysis, this study asks the following questions:

- Q1: What is the extent of coverage by the newspapers?
- Q2: What is the news source cited by the newspapers?
- Q3: What is the slant of the news stories?
- Q4: Who are the journalists that constructed the news stories?
- Q5: What is the news frame used by the newspapers?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Graber and Smith (2005), the field of political communication encompasses the construction, sending, receiving and processing of messages that potentially have a significant direct or indirect impact on politics. The message senders or receivers may be politicians, journalists, members of interest groups or private, unorganised citizens. The key element is that the message has a significant political effect on the thinking, beliefs and behaviours of individuals, groups, institutions, and whole societies and the environments in which they exist. The idea of public sphere was

conceptualised by the German thinker Jurgen Habermas, who identified it as the institutional space of a society in which political "will information" was realised (Fico et al. 2008). The public sphere is comprised of various media sources, clubs, salons, pamphlets and other venues in which individuals become social actors and manifest the human pursuit of knowledge and freedom. A key aspect of the public sphere is how exactly such places foster communication. In addition, Dahlgren (2005) defined public sphere as a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates—ideally in an unfettered manner—and also the formation of political will (i.e., public opinion). Habermas (2006) said a free press exists to preserve openness for competing opinions and a representative diversity of voices.

One of the most central concepts of contemporary political communication research is framing (Stromback and van Aelst 2010). Meanwhile, much of the media scholarship which has focused on the news industry has tended to view the sector in mostly negative terms when it comes to evaluating the media's role as information-giver and advocate for the public sphere (Ross 2007). This is largely because of the view that news workers, through a decision-making process which deliberately selects some stories and excludes others, frame and set the news agenda, determine what we see, read and hear. The relatively uncontroversial theory that has emerged from studies of news over the past decades suggests that the frames within which stories are worked contain particular ideological biases, which the news consumer is presented with as simple "truth." Ross (2007) pointed out that it is precisely this masking of artifice by passing it off as apparent "reality" which makes journalism more art than craft: It is the pretence of offering us an unvarnished and unmediated truth which gives the practice of journalism its dangerous power.

Scholars (Bosman and d'Haenens 2008; McCombs 2005) pointed out that the most frequently cited definition of framing comes from Entman (1993):

Framing is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

(Entman 1993, 52)

Other definitions for framing include "the process of calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, which might lead to different reactions" (Griffin 2003); and "the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion in the media agenda when a particular object is discussed" (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007).

Tankard (2008) enumerated several news features that commonly convey frames. They are headlines and kickers, subheads, photographs, photo captions, leads, etc. Furthermore, Wong (2004) outlined four major dimensions of framing that could be studied: (1) presentation of news items (their size and placement); (2) news topic items (or what issues are included in the frame); (3) cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues included); and (4) affective attributes (tone of the picture).

In addition, Weaver (2007) mentioned that frame can be studied by means of systematic content analysis or more interpretive textual analysis alone. Van Gorp (2007) also observed that some researchers opt for a rather qualitative approach in analysing media frame, such as discourse analysis, while others apply traditional content analysis or other quantitative methods. Furthermore, Tankard (2008) remarked that framing might give quantitative researchers a way to approach ideology, a subject mostly dealt with by critical theorists to date. Framing may even give quantitative researchers a means to examine the hypothesis of media hegemony, one that has been difficult to validate empirically.

Examining the extensive literature on media framing, Matthes and Kohring (2008) summarised the methodological approaches for the measurement of media frames as follows:

1. Hermeneutic approach: Identifies frames by providing an interpretative account of media texts linking up frames with broader cultural elements. These studies are rooted in the qualitative paradigm; and are based on small samples that mirror the discourse of an issue or an event. Typically, frames are described in depth and no quantification is provided.
2. Linguistic approach: Identifies frames by analysing the selection, placement and structure of specific words and sentences in a text. Usually, the unit of analysis is the paragraph instead of the article. The basic idea is that specific words are the building blocks of frames.
3. Manual holistic approach: Generates frames by a qualitative analysis of some news texts and then code them as holistic variables in a manual content analysis. In most studies, there is no criterion for which frames, and how many, are to be found.

4. Computer-assisted approach: It is a more quantitative procedure compared to the three methods mentioned above. It is also called the "frame mapping" approach, whereby the authors seek to identify frames by examining specific vocabularies in text. It is a method of finding particular words that occur together in some texts and do not tend to occur together in other texts. Words that tend to occur together in texts are identified with the help of cluster algorithms. Therefore, frames are not found by the researcher but computed by the computer program.
5. Deductive approach: Identifies frames from the literature and texts are coded in standard content analysis. The crucial prerequisite is that the frames needed to be known beforehand and they suit the topic currently under investigation. The most commonly cited frames were postulated by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), which include conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality and responsibility. These frames are used to examine the coverage of a range of issues, including integration, racial-ethnic issues, immigration, drugs or crime.

METHODOLOGY

The newspapers chosen for this study are *Sin Chew Daily* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*. While enjoying the largest circulation among the Chinese language dailies, *Sin Chew* is also targeting the elite readers of the community. *Nanyang* is the fourth largest circulated Chinese daily, and it aims at the non-elite readers of the community.

The sample of this study was drawn from 26 October to 4 November 2010 as it represents the peak period of the by-elections. This study used the census sample as scholars claimed that a census often makes the most sense for research that examines a particular event or series of events (Neuendorf 2002; Riffe et al. 2005). The unit of analysis was the article, which included the straight news, editorials, columns, opinions and letters.

Figure 1 represents the research framework of this study. The framing of the Galas and Batu Sapi by-elections were studied from five different dimensions: 1) extent of coverage; 2) news sources; 3) slants; 4) types of journalists; and 4) news frames. The extent of coverage was studied from three angles: 1) number of news items; 2) type of news items; and 3) size of news items (measured by word count). The categories for news sources were: 1) leaders from BN; 2) leaders from opposition parties; 3) representatives

from professional organisations or non-government organisations (NGOs); and 4) common civilians.

Slants of the articles refer to the attitude expressed towards any individual, group, party or institution by its user. This study used the categories of supportive, critical and neutral for the analysis of slants: 1) supportive to BN; 2) supportive to opposition parties; 3) critical to BN; 4) critical to opposition parties; and 5) neutral.

- 1) Supportive to BN – conveys a favourable impression towards BN, its candidates or election campaigns; supports or justifies them; contains quotes by individuals who approves of them.
- 2) Supportive to opposition parties – conveys a favourable impression towards opposition parties, its candidates or election campaigns; supports or justifies them; contains quotes by individuals who approves of them.
- 3) Critical to BN – conveys a negative meaning towards BN, its candidates or election campaigns; causes the readers to form a negative opinion towards them; contains unfavourable descriptions of them.
- 4) Critical to opposition parties – conveys a negative meaning towards opposition parties, its candidates or election campaigns; causes the readers to form a negative opinion towards them; contains unfavourable descriptions of them.
- 5) Neutral – neither favourably nor unfavourably portrays BN or opposition parties, their candidates or election campaigns.

The types of journalists were separated into: 1) own reporters, 2) National News Agency (BERNAMA), and 3) other. This study established five news frames and the following are their operational definitions:

- 1) Thematic frame – refers to the interpretive patterns that focus on candidates' issue positions and proposals. The emphasis of news stories is on the platforms and programs represented by the different candidates.
- 2) Horse-race frame – focuses on the evolution of the campaign as a race among candidates. The emphasis is on who is advancing and who is falling behind and therefore on polling numbers and on the campaign strategies of the candidates.
- 3) Personality-centred frame – refers to the tendency of the media to give preference to individual actors and to adopt human-interest angles in events, while downplaying institutional and political considerations. It is also called the "human impact" or "human-interest" frame.

- 4) Episodic frame – refers to the event-centred news stories that reported facts or actors' statements, adopting a more descriptive mode of coverage. In this type of coverage, journalists basically report current campaign events and the beliefs of actors, usually limiting themselves to quoting their statements.
- 5) Other – any other frames that do not fit into the abovementioned categories.

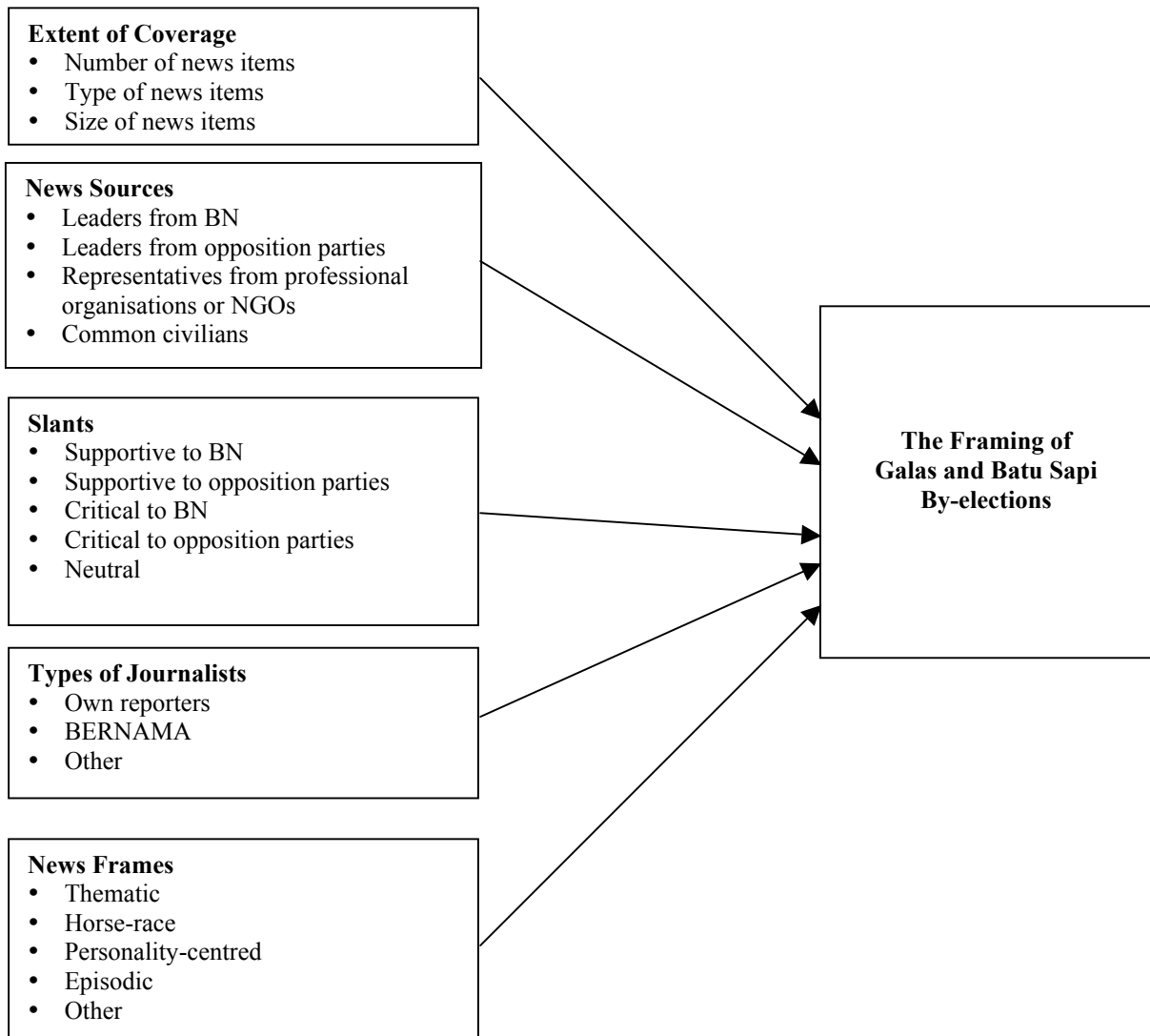


Figure 1: The research framework of the study.

FINDINGS

A total of 254 articles regarding the Galas and Batu Sapi by-elections were harvested from *Sin Chew Daily* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*. *Sin Chew* contributed relatively more with 147 articles, while *Nanyang* contributed 107 articles (refer Table 1). Most of the articles found in the two newspapers were

straight news. *Sin Chew* published more column articles (8.16 percent) than *Nanyang* (5.61 percent). A finding of interest was that *Sin Chew* had an article called "interview postscript" in its coverage of the by-elections (0.68 percent). It was an article written by a reporter after interviewing PAS Galas candidate Zulkefli Mohamed. The reporter wrote about his personal impression towards Zulkefli. He commented that Zulkefli is a gentle candidate and spoke softly during the interview. He also wrote that Zulkefli listened seriously to the interview questions and only answered them after thinking thoroughly. The reporter mentioned that although Zulkefli is not a good public speaker he is nevertheless very friendly. Also, it was mentioned that affinity was the biggest "weapon" for Zulkefli in the competition but there is much room for him to grow as a political leader. On average, *Sin Chew* published more words (390 words) than *Nanyang* (352 words) on the by-elections.

Table 1: Extent of coverage.

	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n = 147)	<i>Nanyang Siang Pau</i> (n = 107)
	%	%
Straight news	91.16	94.39
Column	8.16	5.61
Interview postscript	0.68	0
Size of article (mean)	390 words	352 words

Both *Sin Chew* (53.91 percent) and *Nanyang* (41.11 percent) relied on BN leaders the most as their news sources (refer Table 2). These BN leaders included the deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, Tengku Razaleigh, MCA president Chua Soi Lek, Tourism Minister Ng Yen Yen, BN candidates for the by-elections, etc. Opposition leaders accounted for 32.81 percent as news sources for *Sin Chew*, followed by representatives from professional organisations or NGOs (9.38 percent) and common civilians (3.91 percent). *Nanyang* also used the opposition leaders as the second major news sources (37.78 percent), followed by representatives from professional organisations or NGOs (12.22 percent) and common civilians (8.89 percent). The important spokespersons for the opposition were PKR adviser Anwar Ibrahim, PAS spiritual leader Nik Abdul Aziz, PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang, DAP adviser Lim Kit Siang, DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng, opposition

candidates for the by-elections, etc. The representatives from professional organisations or NGOs included the EC of Malaysia, Royal Police of Malaysia (PDRM) and Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam).

Table 2: News sources.

	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (<i>n</i> = 147)	<i>Nanyang Siang Pau</i> (<i>n</i> = 107)
	%	%
Leaders from BN	53.91	41.11
Leaders from opposition parties	32.81	37.78
Representatives from professional organisation/NGOs	9.38	12.22
Common civilians	3.91	8.89

Table 3 shows that *Sin Chew* was more supportive to BN, while *Nanyang* was more supportive to opposition parties. Therefore, it is of no surprise to find that *Nanyang* was also more critical to BN. An analysis of the slants also revealed that *Sin Chew* carried more neutral articles than *Nanyang*. In addition, both the newspapers relied on their own reporters for the coverage of the by-elections (refer Table 4).

Table 3: Analysis of slants between *Sin Chew Daily* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*.

	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (<i>n</i> = 147)	<i>Nanyang Siang Pau</i> (<i>n</i> = 107)
	%	%
Supportive to BN	23.38	16.81
Supportive to opposition parties	10.39	15.04
Critical to BN	12.99	24.78
Critical to opposition parties	12.34	12.39
Neutral	40.91	30.97

Table 4: Types of journalists for newspaper coverage.

	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n = 147)	<i>Nanyang Siang Pau</i> (n = 107)
	%	%
Own reporters	100.00	100.00

Both *Sin Chew* and *Nanyang* had the same emphasis for their coverage of the by-elections. The most salient frame found in the two newspapers was episodic, followed by thematic, horse-race, other and personality-centred (refer Table 5).

Table 5: News frames for *Sin Chew Daily* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*.

	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n = 147)	<i>Nanyang Siang Pau</i> (n = 107)
	%	%
Thematic	26.67	26.61
Horse-race	18.67	17.43
Personality-centred	11.33	5.50
Episodic	29.33	33.94
Other	14.00	16.51

Episodic Frame

By imposing the episodic frame, the newspapers focused on the event-centred news stories that reported facts or actors' statements. They also adopted a more descriptive mode of coverage. For example, the deputy secretary of the EC, Noordin Che Ngah was quoted as saying that the commission had arranged for the BN and PAS teams to use different routes to the nomination centre. The arrangement was made to avoid the two teams to be too close to each other, which could lead to unnecessary confrontation. Noordin also stated that the security distance between supporters of opposing parties is 180 metres to prevent anyone from being hit by mineral bottles thrown by the rival

supporters (*Sin Chew Daily* 26 October 2010a). Besides, the Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein warned all parties not to bring up any sensitive religious and ethnic issues during the Galas by-election campaign. He also mentioned that the police would take action against those who do so (*Sin Chew* 26 October 2010b).

Nanyang reported that there was a fight between two fractions of PKR supporters after sending off Anwar Ibrahim at the Sandakan airport. The clash erupted between the supporters of the chosen PKR candidate Ansari Abdullah, a party supreme council member, and the supporters of the Sabah PKR chief Ahmad Thamrin Jaini. According to *Nanyang*, Ahmad Thamrin was considered by his supporters as a better candidate than Ansari because the former was born and bred in Sandakan whereas the latter is an outsider. It was also reported that Ahmad Thamrin's supporters provoked Ansari's supporters by hurling insults towards the latter. Besides, *Nanyang* reported that nearly half of the audience walked out of the Hakka Community Hall when Anwar announced Ansari to be the opposition candidate a day before the fight (*Nanyang Siang Pau* 26 October 2010a).

By engaging the episodic frame, the newspapers also reported that Ansari and two others fell into the sea after a wooden walkway collapsed in a village off Pulau Api Api. Although they were unhurt, Ansari's mobile phone and camera were damaged. Following the incident, Ansari said although he did not view the mishap as a bad omen, it clearly showed that BN had failed to look after the people's needs (*Nanyang* 28 October 2010a). Two days later, Ansari fell into the sea again after a rickety wooden bridge collapsed at Kampung Gas and suffered from minor injuries to his knee and chest (*Nanyang* 30 October 2010). Nevertheless, Ansari said he was optimistic towards the incidents because the Chinese believe that "water brings prosperity" and he believed water would bring him victory for the by-election (*Sin Chew* 1 November 2010a).

Sin Chew Daily reported that Tengku Razaleigh did not accompany BN candidate Abdul Aziz to the nomination centre and therefore some people said the former was having problems with UMNO. Explaining the matter, Tengku Razaleigh said he normally does not go to the district office during the nomination process. He added that many of his friends were already accompanying the candidate to submit his nomination papers. So, he felt it was better for him to remain outside with the supporters and workers from all over the country who had converged at the centre (*Sin Chew* 27 October 2010a).

In addition, it was reported in *Sin Chew* that a Gua Musang villager dressed up like the god of wealth to deliver sweets to the supporters and rallied for PAS (*Sin Chew* 27 October 2010b). On the other hand, the deputy president of MCA, Liow Tiong Lai denied that the re-building of the Gua Musang Chinese primary school was a "sweets giving" election strategy used by BN (*Sin Chew* 27 October 2010c). It was also reported that the Home Ministry approved 49 applications of citizenship and 52 applications for birth certificate by the Sandakan people. However, the deputy Home Minister Lee Chee Leong denied that the approval was related to the Batu Sapi by-election (*Sin Chew* 4 November 2010).

Under the episodic frame, it was also reported that four university students were arrested by the police in connection with their alleged involvement in campaigning for PAS in the Galas by-election. The students aged between 18 and 25 were brought to the Gua Musang district police headquarters after police received a tip off that they were distributing flyers of PAS (*Nanyang* 31 October 2010a).

Thematic Frame

The thematic frame refers to the interpretive patterns that focus on the candidates' issue positions and proposals. The emphasis of the news stories is about the platforms and programs represented by the different candidates. By engaging the thematic frame, *Sin Chew* and *Nanyang* also reflected the "development" theme, which was emphasised by BN during the by-election campaigns. For example, the Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin announced that a total of 1,500 houses would be built in Kelantan for the poor under the public housing project (PPRT). He stated that the RM180-million project would benefit some 10,000 people of all races (*Nanyang* 26 October 2010c). The Chief Minister of Sabah, Musa Aman also proclaimed that the state government had allocated RM300 thousands to the ten Chinese primary schools in Sandakan in response to BN candidate Linda Tsen's request (*Nanyang* 26 October 2010d). Moreover, Muhyiddin maintained that a victory for BN in the Batu Sapi by-election would be an endorsement of the Prime Minister's efforts to transform the economy as well as the 1Malaysia concept. In addition, Muhyiddin emphasised that it was the task of the coalition parties to convince the Batu Sapi voters that Linda Tsen was the right candidate. He also urged the BN parties to be sincere and united in the campaign (*Sin Chew*

28 October 2010a). When asked about the allegations that BN was intending to give out RM2,000 to each voter, Muhyiddin denied and instead stressed that BN has always abide by all election rules. Furthermore, he described PKR candidate Ansari as a recycled candidate because the latter was appointed eight times as an election candidate but had never won. He also mentioned that there was no capable candidate in PKR and therefore Ansari was recycled repeatedly (*Sin Chew* 27 October 2010d).

MCA president Chua Soi Lek also thought that the outcome of the Galas by-election was an indication of the Chinese community's support for MCA and BN, as well as support for the various transformation plans and changes under Prime Minister Najib's leadership. He highlighted that BN is a tested coalition with a proven development record. He added that MCA proves itself to be a party championing Chinese interest through action. For example, the party had fought for the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) students to be recruited into teacher training college; scholarship to be rewarded fairly; allocation for half-subsidised Chinese primary schools; requisition of land for Chinese primary schools, etc. He even declared that he would resign if he does not walk his talk (*Sin Chew* 29 October 2010a). Commenting on UMNO Titiwangsa division chief, Johari Abdul Ghani's statement that UMNO does not need Chinese and Indian voters, Chua slammed that some junior UMNO leaders were arrogant and not fit to be the people's representatives under the 1Malaysia concept (*Sin Chew* 30 October 2010a).

BN candidate for Batu Sapi, Linda Tsen mentioned that she would think of ways to help the single-parent families if she was elected. She said she understands the difficulties faced by these families, as she became one of them since her husband Edmund Chong Ket Wah passed away in a road accident. Addressing the massive traffic congestion in Taman Mawar, Tsen pointed out that her late husband had managed to obtain RM4.2 million from the government to build a bypass road that would ease the traffic and she would accomplish the task for her husband (*Sin Chew* 29 October 2010b).

PAS candidate for Galas, Zulkefli Mohamed announced his election manifesto which included: (1) to carry on the unfinished task of the late Galas MP Che Hashim Sulaima; (2) to solve the long-standing land title problem; (3) to develop Galas comprehensively; (4) to provide mobile medical and health check-up services to voters; and (5) to suggest the setting up of a special committee by the Kelantan state government to handle the *orang asli* affairs. Zulkefli also highlighted that his personal campaign strategy was "convincing, explaining and educating" the voters. He stressed that he would definitely not discredit or attack the rival. Responding to BN criticism that PAS had

deliberately avoided local issues because it had yet to resolve long-standing problems like land titles, Zulkefli said he would leave it to the voters to judge (*Sin Chew* 29 October 2010c). Besides, he revealed that there was an article in the Internet that attacked him but he would not persist on the matter since the article had been deleted and the author had apologised (*Sin Chew* 27 October 2010e). Zulkefli also pointed out that the Kelantan state government had actually achieved an oral agreement with the federal government to implement Housing and Development Board (HDB) Flat but the plan was hijacked by BN (*Sin Chew* 27 October 2010f).

DAP adviser Lim Kit Siang asserted that the voters in Galas shouldered the mission to change the regime and create new history. He also saw the Galas by-election as a warming-up for the upcoming years' general election. In addition, Lim slammed Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak for the extreme remarks made during the UMNO general assembly. He claimed that Najib said UMNO would give all to defend Putrajaya even if it means "body has to be smashed to pieces and bones to be grounded to powder." Lim criticised that Najib sounded like a radical and was completely different from his statement made at the United Nation, where he called for all people with middle ground thinking around the world to be united to fight against extremism. Lim also condemned MCA and Gerakan for not daring to refute Najib's allegedly ridiculous rhetoric (*Nanyang* 26 October 2010d).

Nanyang reported that the SAPP president Yong Teck Lee, who was also the party's candidate for Batu Sapi by-election, had continuously promoted SAPP as the best choice for a better Sabah, reviving the "Sabah for Sabahans" campaign in a concerted effort to convince voters of the party's viability as administrators (*Nanyang* 28 October 2010b). Also, Yong pointed out that there was too much infighting in PKR that it would make no sense to become part of *Pakatan Rakyat*, i.e., the coalition of PKR–DAP–PAS. He claimed that the PKR disarray was bad to the point that some of the party members were involved in a fistfight at the Sandakan airport over the party's choice of candidate, hours before the nomination process (*Nanyang* 28 October 2010c). In addition, Yong blamed UMNO for the *Saham Amanah Sabah* (SAS) debacle where the trust fund value plunged from RM1 per share to as low as RM0.17 each, causing local investors' losses amounting to millions of ringgit (*Nanyang* 30 October 2010b). Responding to PKR's Ansari call for a debate, Yong swatted aside Ansari's challenge and instead issued his own dare to Sabah Chief Minister Musa Aman to prove that SAPP struggles for Sabah rights were outdated. He also implied that he is of the same level as

senior PKR leaders such as de-facto leader Anwar Ibrahim, and was not interested in entertaining Ansari, who is only the division chief of Tuaran (*Nanyang* 29 October 2010a).

Horse-race Frame

The horse-race frame focuses on the evolution of the campaign as a race among candidates. The emphasis is on who is advancing and who is falling behind and therefore on polling numbers and the campaign strategies of the candidates. For example, the BN leaders heaped praises on the Galas by-election director, Tengku Razaleigh for his moderate campaign strategy. It was reported that Ku Li's strategy of making house-to-house visits instead of organising speeches or gatherings was the right way. He also insisted on a clean and gentlemanly campaign that did not indulge in accusations and slander (*Nanyang* 28 October 2010d).

The MCA vice president Chor Chee Heung mentioned that BN focused on the development theme for the Galas by-election campaign and had received good response from the voters. He claimed that MCA obtained support from 65 percent of the Chinese voters according to a public opinion poll (*Sin Chew* 27 October 2010g). The Tourism Minister, who is also the Kelantan MCA state liaison committee chairman, Ng Yen Yen stated that by calculation, there were 970 Chinese voters who were fence-sitters and they needed to be convinced of what BN had to offer. She added that there were more than 2,000 Chinese voters and MCA hoped to have 45 percent of the votes for BN. Ng also said she did not believe that PAS candidate Zulkefli could win 70 percent of the Chinese votes (*Sin Chew* 31 October 2010a).

Sin Chew reported that the Batu Sapi by-election was different from the previous ones because the voters' major concern was the candidates instead of the party they represented. Therefore, the three candidates stood an equal chance of winning, which was 30/30/30, with the remaining 10 percent fence sitters to be the determining factor of the by-election outcome (*Sin Chew* 28 October 2010b). *Nanyang* reported that all three candidates for the Batu Sapi by-election would be vying to win over the 59 percent Muslim *bumiputra* voters, where UMNO would play the key role to ensure that the BN seat was retained. It was also reported that some expected sympathy for BN candidate Tsen to pull the hearts of the Chinese, especially the 38 percent Chinese voters, as she had just lost her husband and was still in mourning (*Nanyang* 28 October 2010d). In another column article, the writer claimed that BN faced a

tough battle for Chinese votes in the Batu Sapi by-election. He pointed out that the SAPP president Yong Teck Lee was a key rival and remained a stumbling block in BN's bid to win with a comfortable margin. According to BN assessment, 60 percent of the 15,009 Muslim *bumiputra* of Bajau, Suluk, Sungai, Bugis and Brunei Malay descent were with BN. It was hoped that BN could get 75–80 percent of Muslim votes so that Tsen could override the Chinese voting trend for the opposition (*Nanyang* 3 November 2010).

On the other hand, the SAPP secretary-general Richard Yong said that his party was gaining ground and Yong was also making inroads into Muslim areas. PKR leaders said the party was within range of capturing the seat and expected to take 40 percent of Muslim *bumiputra* votes and another 30 percent Chinese support (*Sin Chew* 1 November 2010b).

Other Frame

The other frame basically focused on the incident involving a group called the "Malaysians for Beng Hock" that happened in Galas. The late Teoh Beng Hock was a former *Sin Chew* journalist who later became the political secretary for the DAP Exco Ean Yong Hian Wah. He was taken to the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) headquarters in Shah Alam on 15 July 2009 for questioning in relation to a probe concerning several *Pakatan Rakyat* assemblypersons. However, he was found dead the next day and his body was found on the rooftop of a building next to the towering block which houses the MACC headquarters. Teoh's death remains a mystery as the MACC claimed it to be a suicide case but his family held MACC responsible.

The "Malaysians for Beng Hock" is a civil society action group created in memory of Teoh. The movement consists of Teoh's family members and 20 members from other civil organisations as well as the Malaysian Bar Council. They demanded the Prime Minister Najib to set up a royal commission of inquiry to investigate the MACC in relation to Teoh's death. During the by-election campaign, eight members of the movement went to Galas to get the cabinet members to sign on their petition. Unfortunately, Sor Cher Hai, Teoh's brother-in-law, was pushed down in a confrontation with MCA members when the movement tried to meet the then Deputy Women, Family and Community Development Minister, Heng Saie Kie to get her signature. Sor suffered minor leg injuries and described the MCA party members as barbaric for pushing him (*Sin Chew* 31 October 2010b). In

response, Heng claimed that Soh did not exactly fall onto the ground and that she had ensured Soh's safety before she left the scene. She also clarified that she was willing to accommodate the group's demand for a meeting in Gua Musang and in Kuala Lumpur, but this was rejected by the group (*Nanyang* 1 November 2010).

The police detained four members of the "Malaysians for Beng Hock" the next day, which included the sister of the late Teoh Beng Hock, Teoh Lee Lan. They were arrested under the allegation of engaging in the by-election campaign activities. Although they were released later, Lee Lan blasted the police for being rude and denying them their constitutional right to legal representation for over an hour. They also released a series of photographs to prove that Soh was violently pushed down by the Gua Musang MCA division secretary. Also, based on the photographs, Heng was seen witnessing the incident, but later left the scene, ignoring Soh who was on the ground just a few feet from her. The movement condemned Heng for issuing misleading statements on the incident. In addition, Lee Lan criticised MCA for failure in helping the family in urging the setting up of a royal commission and for blaming the family for politicising the issue when they sought the help of other concerned citizens (*Sin Chew* 1 November 2010c).

Commenting on the arrest, a columnist of *Nanyang* criticised the police for doing the most unpleasant thing at the most sensitive moment. He also slammed the police for arrogance and insensitivity in their domineering track record (*Nanyang* 2 November 2010).

Personality-centred Frame

The personality-centred frame refers to the tendency of the media to give preference to individual actors and to adopt human-interest angles in events. When asked about his strength, the BN candidate for Galas, Abdul Aziz jokingly mentioned that he is "more handsome" than his rival Zulkefli. Nonetheless, he said as a former civil servant, he has plenty of experience serving the people. He also emphasised that he is able to communicate with people from all walks of life besides understanding their problems (*Sin Chew* 30 October 2010b). Abdul Aziz also said he was not worried although Zulkefli has a medical degree while he is merely a *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) certificate holder.

On the other hand, PAS was confident that Zulkefli could measure up to BN. Its president Abdul Hadi Awang said Zulkefli was the top choice, adding that his medical professional stature could help him to withstand the pressure

of going against BN in a constituency, which was perceived to be an UMNO stronghold for the past three decades. It was reported in *Sin Chew* that although Zulkefli had faced off twice against Tengku Razaleigh in the 2004 and 2008 general elections, he had more votes from the Chinese. It was also reported that Zulkefli comes from a political family. He is the son of the former PAS Guchil assemblyman Mohamad Awang who won the seat in 1974. Zulkefli has been interested in politics since he was eight years old and the passion continues as he grows. After graduating from university, he joined PAS and became the permanent member of the party (*Sin Chew* 30 October 2010c). Zulkefli also invited Abdul Aziz for a race and tug-of-war to see who was healthier since the latter claimed that he was chubby and unhealthy. He stated that he had experience of not sleeping for 36 continuous hours when he was working in the hospital and thus the by election campaign was not a difficult task for him (*Nanyang* 29 October 2010b).

According to *Nanyang*, the BN candidate Tsen was fully playing the "sympathy card" because her election manifesto was mainly centred on the theme of accomplishing the unfinished task of her late husband. It was also reported that her speech and actions were restricted by the colleagues and working committee around her. Thus, Tsen was unable to speak freely even during the interviews. It was also observed that Tsen tended to take cue from the colleague accompanying her before she speaks. Besides, she was described as introverted and needed the PBS leaders to plan her speeches, actions and campaign activities. Tsen seemed uncomfortable with her new role because she was rather shy in facing the voters or the media. On the other hand, Tsen refuted PKR's allegation that she could not speak Bahasa Malaysia and emphasised that learning is a life-long matter instead (*Nanyang* 30 October 2010c).

DISCUSSION

The number of news stories found in *Sin Chew* and *Nanyang* showed that the newspapers viewed the Galas and Batu Sapi by-elections as newsworthy. Indeed, elections have important consequences since they determine the distribution of political power in a society and involve conflicts among the candidates (Lee 2010). In addition, the two Chinese newspapers devoted most of their coverage to straight news. There appeared to be very little political opinions or analysis on the by-elections, there was also a clear absence of

readers' comment. Furthermore, the two Chinese newspapers depended heavily on BN leaders as their news sources.

These findings reveal that there is a certain degree of partisan bias in the coverage of the by-elections by *Sin Chew* and *Nanyang*. These phenomena can be explained from the perspective of hegemony, or specifically media hegemony, which is a consequence of the close media-state relationship along with repressive laws in Malaysia. Media hegemony is a term to describe the mass media being controlled by the dominant class in society and as aiding in exerting the control of dominant class over the rest of society (Carragee and Roefs 2004). Ultimately, it aims to mobilise the masses so that they will accept the ideologies of the dominant group as "common sense" (Artz and Murphy 2000; Reese 2007). By devoting most of their articles to the straight news, both *Sin Chew* and *Nanyang* performed surveillance instead of correlation function in their coverage of the by-elections. The opinion pieces are not just ways to validate and supplement the news but also a great way to increase the awareness of people about a particular topic (Fico and Cote 2002). More importantly, Woodstock (2002) asserted that readers' opinion function as counterbalance to the news and a chance for the readers to "talk back." Furthermore, a reader's letter is also known as an "enduring forum for public debate" by Wahl-Jorgensen (2007), while Jha (2008) recognised that letters allow citizens to communicate with one another, and even to act together.

Significantly, Anuar (2005) also detected similar hegemonic coverage in his analysis of the March 2004 general elections. He addressed that the public sphere in Malaysian society has been constrained so that ordinary citizens and concerned civil society groups have not been able to fully express their views and directly participate in the country's democratic process. Moreover, he added that political rallies are generally banned in Malaysia and official organs of the opposing political parties are confined to their respective membership only. In this respect, he contended that the mainstream press is instrumental in helping to promote the state's hegemonic influence over the society.

Sources play an important role in the framing process of news media (Downing et al. 2004). Furthermore, Tresch (2009) noted that having a voice in the media is a key political strategy to gain legitimacy and power in the political process. It is also argued that if political actors are able to bring media attention to their cause and mobilise public support, they can swing momentum to their side and exert pressure in the policy-making process. The equal treatment of candidates at elections has frequently been the subject of researchers investigating notions of bias, balance and diversity (Hagen 1993).

Partisan bias influences story structure by affecting the selection of sources involved in a conflict and the prominence given to those sources in stories (Fico et al. 2008). Ideally, various sources should have an equal opportunity of using the news as a channel of communication and the public should be supplied with a choice of diverse opinions or representations. This study found that *Sin Chew* and *Nanyang* tended to give more attention to BN leaders, and thus inclined to create a specific picture of power and hegemony by legitimating BN's opinion, stance and status. Meanwhile, it also means that the opposition leaders were given less opportunity to explain their policy positions, address their preferred issues to justify their beliefs and problem solutions.

Although most of the articles in *Sin Chew* and *Nanyang* carried a neutral slant, it is vital to note that the slant of news stories matters because biasness affects political outcomes by influencing voters exposed to news messages. Some research has directly related election news coverage to candidate's poll standing (Mayer 2001; Painter and Hodges 2010). It is also found that partisan opponents often attempt to get competing persuasive messages favourably placed in news coverage in order to win public support. It could have cumulative and systematic effects over time, distorting the political process by reinforcing some political orientations to the detriment of others (Fico et al. 2008).

It was mentioned earlier in the Findings that both *Sin Chew* and *Nanyang* reflected the "development" theme, which was emphasised by BN during the by-election campaigns. Anuar (2005) also noted this trend in his study:

The government expects Malaysia's mainstream media not only to publicise but also to flaunt to the whole country the BN Government's achievements, particularly in the area of socioeconomic development. The mainstream press depicts the government leaders as having a "naturalised" affinity with the general populace in terms of socioeconomic aspirations and goals. This wide public pronouncement of the incumbent BN's economic successes is facilitated by the media's deliberate narrowing, if not closure, of access for the other contesting political parties. The opposition parties' stand on some issues and their policies on economic, political and cultural matters are hardly heard by the electorate. Worse, the coverage of the opposition parties by the

mainstream media often resulted in the former being depicted in the most negative light possible.

(Anuar 2005, 28)

It was also reported in the Findings that PAS candidate for Galas, Zulkefli Mohamed stressed that he would definitely not discredit or attack the rival, while BN by-election director, Tengku Razaleigh insisted on a clean and gentlemanly campaign that did not indulge in accusations and slander. Kane (2003) stated that moral capital (or reputation/standing) represents a resource for political agents and institutions that are tied to the question of political effectiveness, legitimacy and survival. Moral capital is understood as a specific political value of virtue that inclines others, in particular the political public and followers, to ethical prestige, respect, loyalty and authority on a political actor or other representative of an institution. Moral capital can be utilised to legitimise political actors, mobilise support or disarm political opponents. Derichs, Fleschenberg and Hustebeck (2006) even remarked that moral capital becomes a powerful tool in the hands of dissidents or opposition leaders who operate in an asymmetric power relation out of a conventional position toward regime change or democratic transition, e.g., general strike or popular grassroots movement.

Previous research showed that one of the most disturbing developments in reporting on elections has been its focus on the horse race, a journalistic perspective that sees elections as a strategic exercise and focuses on who is ahead and who is behind in an election contest (Johnson et al. 2009; Mayer 2001; Patterson 2000; Skewes and Plaisance 2005). However, this study found that both *Sin Chew* and *Nanyang* focused the greatest attention on the episodic frame in their coverage of the Galas and Batu Sapi by-elections. They focused on the event-centred news stories, which reported facts or actors' statements, while adopting a more descriptive mode of coverage. In this type of coverage, journalists basically reported the campaign events and the beliefs of actors by quoting their statements. This finding was consistent with the earlier discussion that the two newspapers performed surveillance instead of correlation function.

Dahlgren (2005) conceptualised the public sphere as consisting of three constitutive dimensions: Structures, representation and interaction. The structural dimension is related to the formal institutional features. It includes media organisations, their political economy, ownership, control, regulation, financing as well as the legal framework defining the freedom and constrains

on communication. The structural dimension also points to society's political institutions, which serve as an environment for the media and set boundaries for the nature of the information and forms of expression that circulate. A society where democratic tendencies are weak is not going to give rise to healthy institutional structures for the public sphere, which in turn means that the representational dimension will be inadequate. The representational dimension refers to the output of the media, which emphasises on criteria like fairness, accuracy, completeness, pluralism of views, agenda setting, ideological tendencies, modes of address and so forth. In terms of the dimension of interaction, Dahlgren (2005) remarked that it is imperative not to lose sight of the classic idea that democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other. This is certainly the basic premise of those versions of democratic theory that see deliberation as fundamental. Unfortunately, this study found that both *Sin Chew* and *Nanyang* were inadequate in their promotion of public sphere, especially in the dimensions of representational and interaction.

Skewes and Plaisance (2005) suggested a new model for media coverage of election campaigns. They highlighted the idea of public sphere and argued that the new model should include a broader range of candidates, represents a greater diversity of opinion and come at a time when voters are more likely to be paying attention. They asserted that the media have a duty to cultivate a public sphere and to broaden the opportunity for citizen participation in democratic government. They also criticised that the current world of campaigns coverage constrains debate and leaves citizens feeling more like spectators in the process. Political news should advance public debate and politicians should be given access to news channels when they have something to say that offers solutions to public issues.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Malaysian Chinese newspapers, *Sin Chew Daily* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*, reported two of the most significant Malaysian by-elections in 2010. Episodic was found to be the most salient frame and the newspapers did not seem inclined to promote the idea of public sphere in their coverage of the election campaigns. The sourcing practice of the newspapers demonstrated certain degree of partisan bias while there is a clear absence of

readers' opinion. Nonetheless, neutral slant was most prevalent in both the newspapers.

It is believed that the findings from this study will be helpful in understanding how the Chinese newspapers in Malaysia cover election campaigns. More research is needed, however, especially at the level of news gatekeeping to investigate the factors contributing to the coverage of election campaigns. Also, more research is needed to investigate the effect of election coverage on the readers or voters.

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