

TRENDS IN NEWS COVERAGE: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF A MALAYSIAN NEWSPAPER

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Abstract: *This paper describes a content analysis of the most English newspaper in Malaysia – the Star on the continued two days. It has found that the hard news occupies most space of the newspaper than soft news. Among them, the categories of sports, business, and social problems appear most often. Generally, the headlines and sentences are concise and simple. It spends about half of the space to cover the advertisements. The result also shows that the top prevailing ads are property, automobile, public service products, and education. And the advertisers prefer colour ads than black and white ads. An essentially significant finding is that positive news of the government and intriguing reports of the opposition party are the common phenomenon on the Star newspaper. These findings can suggest the current practical norms and principles in the newspaper organization, which will give news practitioners warning if possible. These findings could also indicate the independence of newspaper organizations from other sources' interference in Malaysia.*

Key words: *News Coverage, the Star, News Categories, Media Ownership, News Independence*

Introduction

History of the Star

The Star is an English-language, tabloid-format newspaper in Malaysia. The latest figures released by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) for the first half of 2016 shows that *the Star* remains the nation's highest circulated daily with a total average daily paid circulation of 359,442 (Nation, 2016).

The daily newspaper was first published on 9 September 1971 as a regional newspaper in Penang. It went into national circulation on 3 January 1976 as the office moved to Kuala Lumpur. In 1981, it moved its headquarters from Kuala Lumpur to Petaling Jaya which is also its current premise to accommodate staff and technology devices. As of September 2016, *The Star* is effectively controlled by the Malaysian government—the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the major shareholder at 42.46%.

The Star weekday paper is packaged as a 4-in-1 paper, comprising the Main Paper, StarBiz, Star2 and Star Metro. Besides of the newspaper, *the Star* also has online newspaper, e-Paper, and stream TV news now.

The Influence of News Media

Our everyday lives are saturated by various kinds of media, such as the Internet, television, newspaper, books, magazines and more. The media helps us disseminate information but also influences us greatly. McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory (1993) contends that mass media tells people what to think about. Media sets the agenda and determines what is important. Through the order, font size, space, and repeating times of the story, they impress upon readers what stories they assume the readers need to pay attention to. Second-level agenda-setting theory (Ghanem, 1997, p. 3), also known as media framing, discovered that media possesses persuasive power. Media frame stories with a set of attributes that affect how the audience perceives stories.

Facing the current revenue models, the media owners hire journalists so that they can redefine newsworthiness while making rules for journalists. Journalism is no longer free considering the interest of media owners.

Wilson and Ogden (2015, p.34) believe that the media frames stories and thereby injects bias, whether intentionally or not. The news is a brief report from detailed stories, and journalists decide what to include. But the company's interest will become the first consideration when choosing what to retain.

As an important part of news media, newspaper organizations play a crucial role in determining public opinions. Therefore, the systematic research in newspaper organizations is needed to figure out whether they are in the correct track or not. However, the newspaper organizations are understudied in Malaysia in terms of their practice norms and principles. Therefore, this research intends to reveal the internal practical norms and principles by content analysis.

Literature Review

Commercial Interference in Media Independence

The media owners are not philanthropists. Their responsibility is not only to supply information for the public but also make money for survival. Therefore, commercial interference has changed the role of journalism.

On the one hand, they cooperate with other corporations, own other utilities or find sponsors. Kellner (1990, p.82) contends that most media organizations are heavily involved in many other industries apart from media. Once they have interest relationships with the third party, news will be deliberately slanted. As a result, the news report is no longer the truth, but the owners' choice. They will pick out "good" opinions and ignore the "bad" ones, in which the defining factor is whether these opinions contribute to their self-interest.

This perspective is reflected by advertisements in newspaper. For newspapers, the largest proportion of revenue comes from advertisers. To ensure a profitable organization, the newspaper may set a priority for advertisements rather than editorial contents.

On the other hand, for company boom under fierce competition, journalists have to focus on what inspires readers' interests rather than what benefits them. McQuail (2010, p.55) contended that more fears are voiced out about the enlightening role of journalism as they increasingly seek to make profits in a highly competitive marketplace where entertainment has more market value than education or art.

This perspective is reflected by the headline and language as well as news categories. The newspaper also needs to attract more readers by highlighting the attractive headline and using common language. The more readers mean more revenues. When selecting the news categories, human interest is taken as an important criterion to decide news value.

Political Interference in Media Independence

Furthermore, political interference also obstructs a news organization's independence. For one thing, the government enacts laws and regulations which media organizations must obey. Conversely, the politicians also fear the power of the media, which induces their desire to control the media and thereby manipulate public opinion.

Because of the political environment, media practices are totally different between democratic societies and totalitarian societies. In totalitarian countries, the state controls and monitors all media practices (Croteau & Hovnes, 2013, p. 73). State-owned news organizations play well as propaganda bearing arms of the state: publicizing a narrow set of images and messages to promote government status. Authoritative governments hire desirable writers to spread their messages while, at the same time, using censorship to monitor potential political threats. In extreme cases, journalists can even be imprisoned or killed for challenging state politicians. Before the Beijing Olympics, the China government bans all media to report the Pro-Tibetan independence, East Turkestan movements and food safety issues such as "cancer-causing mineral water.

Although democratic societies have more freedom of press and expression, they are still subject to government regulation. Even though the media outlets are not owned by governments, their potential power on public opinion makes them the subject of political control. In the 2016 election, Trump effectively worked the media as a free platform for his message and a chance to build a following. According to Thomas E. Patterson (2016), "Trump is arguably the first bona fide media-created presidential nominee. Although he subsequently tapped a political nerve, journalists fueled his launch." (as cited in Graber & Dunaway, 2017, p. 2)

This aspect can influence newspaper's independence by sharing the ownership. This can be done by exerting pressure through license issuing or by buying shares of the newspaper. In both ways, the political parties can influence the related reports by controlling the organizations' ownership.

Technology Impact

Technological developments in recent decades have profoundly transformed communication society, like the internet, social media, mobiles phones, and more. These electronic tools have provided breathtakingly dynamic, radically decentralized and surprisingly fast means for people to communicate with others.

Currently, the media environment is being shaped by seemingly two contradictory trends. For one thing, new media technologies have lowered production and distribution costs of media

companies, expanded the range of available delivery channels. For another thing, ownership concentration of mainstream commercial media alarms public concern about democracy, with a small number of multinational joint enterprises dominating all sectors of the journalism industry. Jenkins (2006) found that concentration of media ownership is obvious as all parts want to work together to pursue maximum profits.

Winseck (2008) found that source diversity becomes more concentrated within countries, regionally and globally. Noam (2009, 2016) also found that all American industries involved in media have increased in concentration after 1996, and basically have increased in concentration since 1984.

Media concentration is a global trend which also brings Journalism a disaster to promote democracy. Meier and Trappel (1998) said that media diversity is a main precondition ensuring effective citizen participation in democratic decision-making process. Since media concentration reduces the variety of voices which public are exposed to, it is hard to realise effective freedom of expression and information. While pluralism is the key feature in an ideal democratic society.

This also influences the ownership of newspaper organizations. In the coercive competition, the newspaper has to find a strong support source to ensure the existence of the company.

Methodology

Like prior study, the qualitative methods (content analysis) will be used to investigate the trend in Malaysian newspaper from the aspect of news categories, advertisements, priorities, and political reports. Qualitative research will give an in-depth analysis of the newspaper organizations' practical norms and principles.

The samples are selected from the biggest English newspaper in Malaysia – the *Star*. The whole newspaper issued in two continual days (November 15, 2017 and November 16, 2017) will be analysed and coded by two lecturers in Journalism department from Xiamen University Malaysia. Disagreement among the coders will be resolved in consultation with the research. The coders will code the following categories: the category of news; the category of ads; the priority of newspaper; and the political influence in news report.

Results and Discussion

News Categories

The Star newspaper is a national newspaper which covers both national and international news. The newspaper is divided into four main interest segments, namely nation, opinions, world, and sports news. Nation news are usually published within the first twenty pages of newspaper and followed with views, world and the last segment is sports.

According to Table 1, on November 15, the newspaper has 161 news in total. Hard news takes up 80.5%. The top three news categories are sports, business, and social problem. Each of them accounts for 25.5%, 16.1% and 16.1% respectively. Political news follows closely at 14.2%.

Table 1: News Categories of The Star on Wednesday, 15 November (Main, Metro, Biz)
Total Number: 161 News

Type	Number	Percentage
Sports	41	25.5%
Business	26	16.1%
Social Problem	26	16.1%
Political	23	14.2%
International	11	6.8%
Personal opinion	7	4.3%
Lifestyle	6	3.7%
Education	5	3.1%
Digital trend	4	2.4%
Technology	3	1.8%
Environment	3	1.8%
Entertainment	3	1.8%
Health	3	1.8%

According to Table 2, on November 16, the main parts of the news beat are almost the same. There are 218 news in the whole newspaper. Hard news covers up to 62.4%. The top three are still sports, business, and social problem at 19.7%, 14.2%, and 13.8% in order. Environment and education are tied for fourth at 4.1%.

Because of the occurrence of World Cup qualifying match, the sports news raises public's interest and concern. Thus, many sports news is republished by *the Star* as they purchase wire feeds from international wire services such as Associated Press (AP) and Reuters. As most Chinese Malaysian are performing in the trade industry, *the Star* also pays more attention to business news. Because social problems involve large population's attention, it also becomes a popular news category.

Table 2: News Categories of The Star on Thursday, 16 November (Main, Metro, Biz)
Total Number: 218

Type	Number	Percentage
Sport	43	19.7%
Business	31	14.1%
Social problem	30	13.8%
Education	9	4.1%
Environment	9	4.1%
International	8	3.7%
Politics	6	2.8%
Personal opinion	6	2.8%
Health	5	2.3%
Travel	5	2.3%
Digital trend	5	2.3%

Lifestyle	3	1.4%
Technology	3	1.4%
Entertainment	1	0.5%

Headlines and Language

The headlines of *the Star* are concise and short. They range from four to eight words. Besides, no articles and redundant words will appear in headlines. Usually it consists of one verb and nouns, such as “Tanjung MCA Youth chief loses entire family in fire”. And abbreviations are also used to simplify it. Many news also utilizes sub-headlines to elaborate the story.

As for the language, they use easy and simple words to write news. Their hard news is one sentence-one paragraph. Mostly they choose active voice and visual elements to tell stories directly. They use inverted pyramid as the story structure. They try to make the stories understandable but sometimes, the sentence structure is a bit complex and long. For example, the lead is “Barely two weeks after his 72-year-old father died of cancer, Tanjung MCA Youth chief Lim Swee Bok suffered another tragic loss when his entire family perished in a fire which gutted his two-storey house in Pintasan Cecil 5 here”.

Advertisements

Figure 1 shows that the advertisements occupies for about 51.25% of the whole newspaper on Wednesday and accounts for 48.11% on Thursday.

Figure 2 shows that on November 15, 36% of pages are filled with all advertisements while 54% of pages are dominated by the advertisements. Among the six sections (Main Paper, Metro, Star2, StarBiz, Star Search, and Star Special), the Main Paper and Metro have the lowest advertisement proportion at 33.27% and 22.5% respectively. On November 16, 41% of pages are filled with all advertisements while 48% of pages are dominated by advertisements.

Figure 1: The Proportion of Advertisements and News on The Star Newspaper on November 15 and November 16, 2018

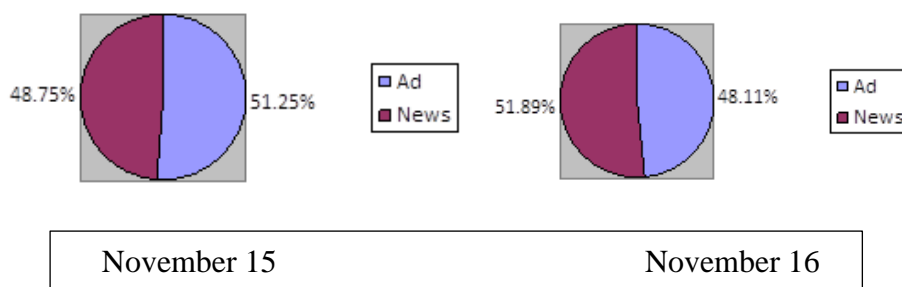


Figure 2: The Occupation of Advertisements on each Page of the Star Newspaper on November 15 and November 16, 2018

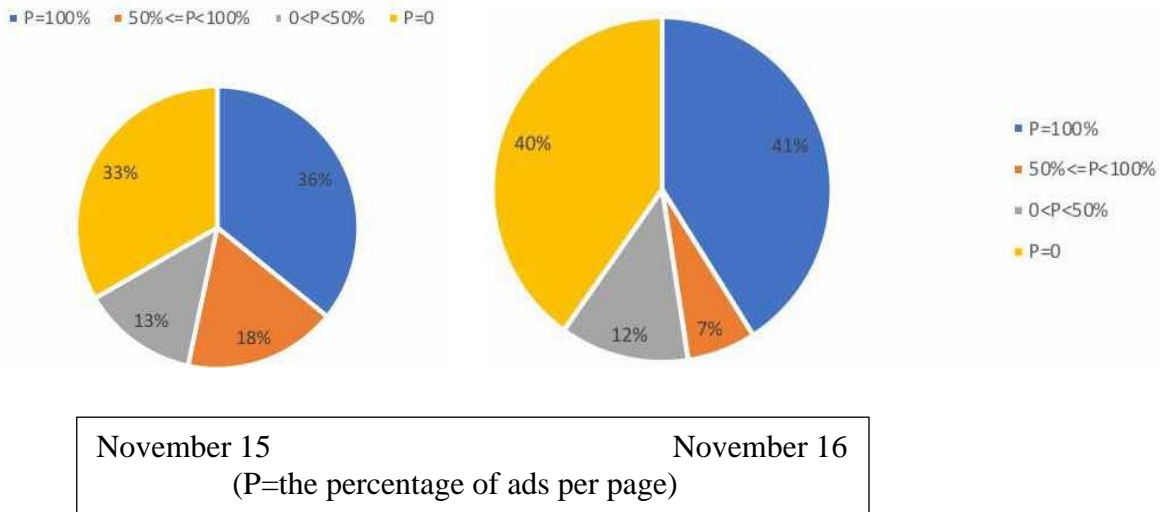


Figure 3 reports that the top prevailing ads are property, automobile, public service products, and education. On Wednesday, property advertisements, automobiles, public service and education take up 50%, 10%, 10%, and 9% respectively. On Thursday, the property ads, public service, automobile and education accounts for 51%, 22%, 9% and 8% respectively.

From Figure 4, it can be seen that the colour advertisements are more than two times of black & white advertisements. And Figure 5 shows that the display advertisements are much more than the classified advertisements because of the flexibility of its size on one page.

Figure 3: The Proportion of Different Types of Advertisements on the Star Newspaper

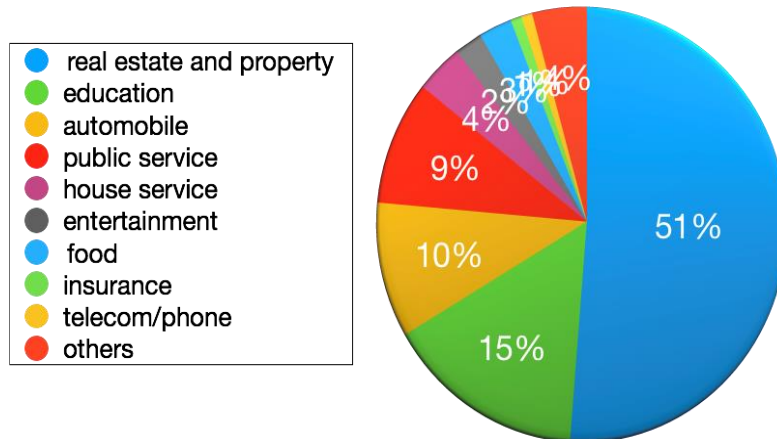


Figure 4: The Percentage of Color Advertisements and Black & White Advertisements

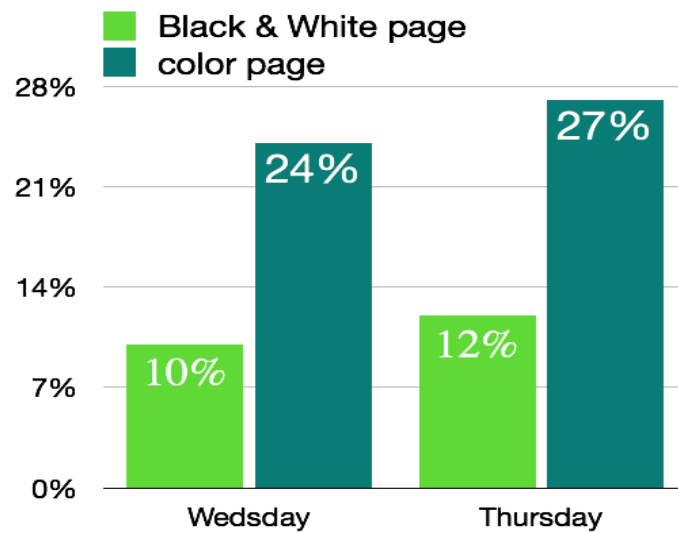
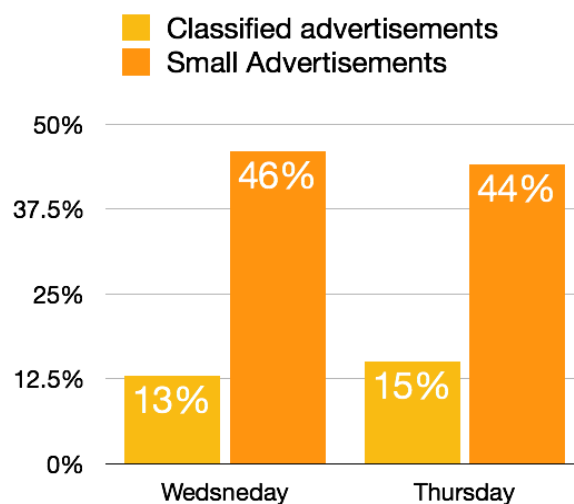


Figure 5: The Percentage of Classified Advertisements and Small Advertisements



Priority

Based on the statistics of the proportion of news and advertisements, it is easy to conclude that the newspaper gives priority to advertisements rather than news. The ads even occupy more space than news. And they even put ads on a whole page more often.

According to Brian Martin, the executive editor in *the Star*, he told us on our class visit to *the Star* company in 2017 that in most cases, advertising department arranges the advertisements before the sub editors put the news and arrange the layout. In other words, news has no choice but to compromise to the space left by advertisements.

Newspaper, as a traditional mass media, most of its income is from advertisement. According to the research of Picard (2004), "In 2000 advertising provided 81% of the total income of daily newspapers." Therefore, *the Star* prioritizes advertisement to maintain its income.

Ownership

The biggest stakeholder of *the Star* is MCA, a key party of the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN). Traditional media ownership in Malaysia is heavily concentrated by BN (Nain, 2017). Considering the fact that BN is the largest party in the Parliament of Malaysia and have dominated Malaysian politics, the effect of media ownership for *the Star* is clearly reflected in the reports that are related to the politics. Generally, The Star manifests a supportive, rather than critical attitude towards government.

For example, a story about Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak entitled “Najib promises development that will take country to new heights” becomes the page lead story. It reports Najib’s ambition of bringing more people-centric infrastructure projects and the government has “clear and concise public development programmes”. Overall, the story like this would create a positive image of government. Thereby, the audience would perceive that their leaders are on the right track and doing the right thing, and it might shape their attitude toward government. These reports, to some degree, reflects the stand of the media--firm supporter of government.

In addition, The Star would publish news to promote government’s policies or ideas, mainly by quoting the government officials. The Star apparently is a desirable platform for government to voice out their ideas. For instance, the news entitled “Ministry: All must help combat trafficking” quotes Deputy Home Minister Datuk Masir Kujat, calling for all parties work together to combat human and wildlife trafficking. In another news entitled “Mastering Bahasa Malaysia is beneficial”, Deputy Education Minister Datuk Chong Sin Woon is the only source. He emphasizes that Malaysian Chinese schoolkids will be groomed to master Bahasa Malaysia better with government’s effort. By publishing those stories, government definitely find a soft but effective approach to deliver their thoughts to the public.

The way *the Star* treats opposition party’s voice is intriguing. The editor arranges two stories at the same page, very close to each other. One is “Dr. M likely to contest in GE 14”, another is “Branch and division delaying Pribumi AGM” (Ahmad, 2017). It is known to all that Dr. Mahathir and his Parti Pribumi Bersatu perhaps would be a threat to Prime Minister Najib and his UMNO in the coming election. Thus, the combination of “Dr. M likely to contest in GE” and “his party even can’t hold its annual general meeting” implies the deficiency of Mahathir.

On November 16, “Tanjung MCA Youth chief loses entire family in fire” (Ali & Lim, 2017) appears on the very front page 3, and the whole page has only this one news. It contains three big photos to demonstrate the tragedy. If the people read this news, they will increase good feeling of MCA in the subconscious. In this news, “MCA” occurs three times. “MCA” is used directly in the headline and the lead.

Conclusion

Because of the economic crisis caused by the new technology, *the Star* newspaper has to give priority to advertisements and their shareholder. Thus, positive news of the government and intriguing reports of opposition party are the common phenomenon on *the Star* newspaper. Considering the fact that BN is the largest party in the Parliament of Malaysia and have dominated Malaysian politics, the effect of media ownership for *the Star* is clearly reflected in the reports that are related to the politics. Generally, The Star manifests a supportive, rather than critical attitude towards government. They will also give more reports about Chinese as MCA represents for the interest of Malaysian Chinese.

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