

## **PERCEPTION OF ISSUES BY FACTORY WORKERS IN MALAYSIA: THE ROLE OF MEDIA**

Aini Maznina Binti A. Manaf, Syed Arabi Idid, Mazni Buyong

International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

### **ABSTRACT**

Media have the ability to shape people's opinion on many important issues of a country. The public's exposure to media is likely to change their opinions towards certain issues that are widely discussed in the media. Factory workers' perception on major issues of a country is important as it entails strong participation in the government's programmes. In light of this concern, a study was conducted to examine the influence of media on factory workers' opinion concerning the issues of importance that take place in Malaysia. Among objectives of the study are: a) to examine the usage of media among factory workers; b) to find out the relationship between media and their perceptions about main issues of the country; and c) to determine the relationship between media and the Prime Minister's leadership. Findings drawn from the survey data indicate that factory workers are high users of media particularly the new media. The findings also indicate that issues from the main media did not solely influence the factory workers in their decision making of whom to vote in the general election. Since they were high users of the new media, they also have the new media as their alternative source of information. Moreover, the findings also show that credibility and reliability of the media play an important role. The respondents would only believe the news only when the sources of information were from reliable sources.

**Keywords:** Factory worker, public opinion, issues, Media, Malaysia

### **1.0. INTRODUCTION**

The media have evolved into an extraordinary resource for sharing and communicating information on all aspects of life, including finance, products and services, education, politics, health and so on. In actual fact, the public heavily rely on media to gain information about how government is doing, stressing the important watchdog function of the media (Claes & Boomgaarden, 2006). To this extent, media is undeniably crucial in influencing public opinion and perception of important issues in a country (A.Manaf, Talibi & Abdul Manan, 2017; Happer & Pillow, 2013; McCombs, Holbert, Kioussis & Wanta, 2016; Baum & Potter, 2008). Public

members are exposed to media every day. More often than not, their opinions on certain issues if not all, are habitually shaped by their media consumption. Since the past decades, traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television have mainly influenced public opinion of issues that take place in a country. On top of that, with the presence of the new media, public have alternatives in getting information especially on issues that are not covered in the traditional media (Kasmani, Sabran and Ramle, 2014; Leong, 2015).

Media mainly play an important role in the dissemination of information, which would influence public in their voting decision (A.Manaf et. al., 2017; Mohd Sani, 2014). Media are believed to be the main avenues for public to obtain information about the current political goings-on and yet they become an important platform that shape public agenda during the election campaign (Wong & Lean, 2011). From news coverage in the media, public could be influenced not only on their voting decision but also on issues that are handled by the existing ruling government ranging from economic, social, health, education, leadership and so on. McCombs (2002) proclaims that media can bring an enormous impact on public through the nation's agenda they set. Media have a powerful and profound influence on their users. Information that the public gain from media on any important issues of the country could shape their opinions on the existing government dominated by the ruling political party and also the opposition, depending on the type of media they use.

Previous research on media and public opinion in Malaysia has mostly concentrated on the role of media in voting among general public (Wong and Lean, 2011), however this study focuses on the use of media in shaping public opinion about important issues in the country. Many sub groups in society continue to be neglected by scholars although a study of their media consumption would be helpful in contributing to an understanding of public perception of issues. Factory groups form such a group that has been marginalised. This group has not been properly studied in their use of media although they contribute to the national economy. This study has taken upon itself to focus attention on the use of media by factory workers in Malaysia. Factory workers which can be considered as minority group were studied instead of general public. Therefore, this study examines how media usage shapes factory workers' opinions on important issues of the country. Importantly, this study will examine which media would contribute to perception of issues or how they themselves experience the issues.

## **2.0. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Study on public opinion in Malaysia is not new. There were studies done to gauge into people's thinking and feelings of important issues in the country (Leong, 2015; A.Manaf et. al., 2017). A Meta analysis conducted by Idid (2012) claimed that early studies of public opinion that were carried out using social science research in Malaysia began during the British colonisation

period. At the break of the Pacific War in 1942, the British administrators examined thinking and feeling of Malaysian natives about several issues such as language, culture, religion, eating habits, beliefs and taboos in order to understand the natives of whom they administered.

Apparently, recognizing the value of public opinion in the country, Western researchers embarked on the identification of issues related to the government (Claes & Boomgaarden, 2006; McCombs et. al., 2016). One related study that was reported by Idid (2012) as one of the known early public opinion studies, was conducted by the Bureau of Social Science Research, American University. The study that was sponsored by the United States Information Agency examined public opinion of economic condition of the country, opinion of the government and also various races in the country. Nonetheless, media is believed as a contributing factor to public opinion of the issues but was not taken into account in this study.

Studies on public opinion in Malaysia have continued to grow, more so with studies related to perception of voters on political issues during elections (Mohd Sani, 2014; Sern and Zanuddin, 2014). The theoretical framework of studies, among others, has used agenda setting involving public opinion and analyses of media contents. Therefore, this study will add on to the literature by looking at the role of media on the issues of country but the focus appears different, as it is on the perception of issues appealing to the factory workers.

In the early years, studies conducted on public opinion looked into media consumption by examining audiences' behaviours. For instance, the first public opinion survey study related to media consumption was carried out in 1937 by Radio Singapore (Idid, 2012). The study was conducted to understand what listeners thought about Radio Station ZHL, its programmes and artistes as well as the foreign recordings.

When general election is around the corner, mass media is believed to become an important platform for public to obtain information about the current country's goings-on (Wong and Lean, 2011). At this point in time, the media undeniably have a strong influence on public and shape their decisions on important issues of the country, thus have a direct and profound influence on voting behaviours. An important sub group of the population has not been studied although the presence of more than 1 million workers constitutes a big size in terms of voters. The Department of Statistics reported that the total employees engaged in the Manufacturing sector in February 2013 were 1,026,603 recorded.

### **3.0. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Drawing on previous research, we examine the influence of media on public opinion among the factory workers on issues that took place in Malaysia in 2013. To that end, we addressed the following the research questions and hypotheses:

- RQ1: What was the media consumption pattern among factory workers?
- RQ2: What is the relationship between media usage and perceptions on main issues of the country?
- RQ3: What is the relationship between media usage and perception about government?
- RQ4: What is the relationship between media usage and the evaluation of the Prime Minister's leadership?

## **4.0. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1. Research Design**

A public opinion survey was conducted using a structured interview technique, in which 615 factory workers were asked about media usage and issues of the country by trained enumerators. The study took place in factories located in Klang Valley. The interviews were conducted in Malay. It was carried out for two weeks in April 2013. Respondents who were Malaysian factory workers and supervisors were approached during their lunch and tea break. The sampling used was purposive sampling. Each interview took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete.

### **4.2. Research instrument**

A survey questionnaire was used as a research instrument in this study. The questionnaire consists of five parts. However, only relevant parts were selected for the purpose of this study namely on mass media use and issues of the country.

*Mass media usage:* Mass media usage was defined by answers to the following question, "Last week, how often did you listen to radio, watch TV, read book and surf internet?" Respondents were asked to circle number of days from 0 to 7. Then, respondents were also asked to answer five items on the question, "how much information you obtain from television". Answers were rated on 4 likert scale (None = 0; to A lot = 4). In addition, the respondents were also asked to indicate the extent to which they were interested on issues covered in the media: using 4 likert scale (highly interested = 1; to highly uninterested=4).

*Perception about the country.* We asked respondents of their perception on the current situation of a country, focusing on 11 items: economy, business, job, racial unity, crime, speech freedom, health, education, public cleanliness, daily price and water supply. For this measure, the respondents were asked to answer the questions using 4 Likert scale (Very bad=1; Very good=4).

*Perception about the government.* To assess the government's ability to solve problems in the country, we created a 9 item-index that addresses control of price rise, the availability of basic needs in the market, quality of public service, house price control, crime rate, job opportunities, bribery, local investment and capital investment.

*Prime Minister's Leadership.* Leadership is operationalized as satisfaction towards Dato' Seri Najib in carrying out his duty as the Prime Minister, assessed in four-Likert scale (Very unsatisfied=1, Very satisfied=4). In addition, we also assessed the Prime Minister's leadership by asking respondents' perceptions on Dato' Seri Najib's with regard to his duties as the Prime Minister. The answers use 4 Likert scale (Very unsatisfied=1, Very satisfied=4).

## 5.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 5.1. Demographic profile of respondents

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents. Out of 615 respondents, more than half of them are male (57.2%). Almost half of the respondents are the young generation in which their age ranges from 20 – 30 years old (51.3%). In consistent with the Malaysian population, about four-fifth of the respondents are Malays (80.8%) and are Muslims (82%). Almost half of the respondents are those who only completed their secondary school.

**Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents**

Demographic profile	Percentage	Frequency
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	57%	
Female	43%	
<b>Race</b>		
Malay	80.8%	
Chinese	5.4%	
Indian	12.5%	
Bumiputera	0.4%	
Others	0.5%	
<b>Religion</b>		
Islam	82%	
Buddhist	4.4%	
Hindu	11.4%	
Christianity	2.1%	
Confucius	0.2%	

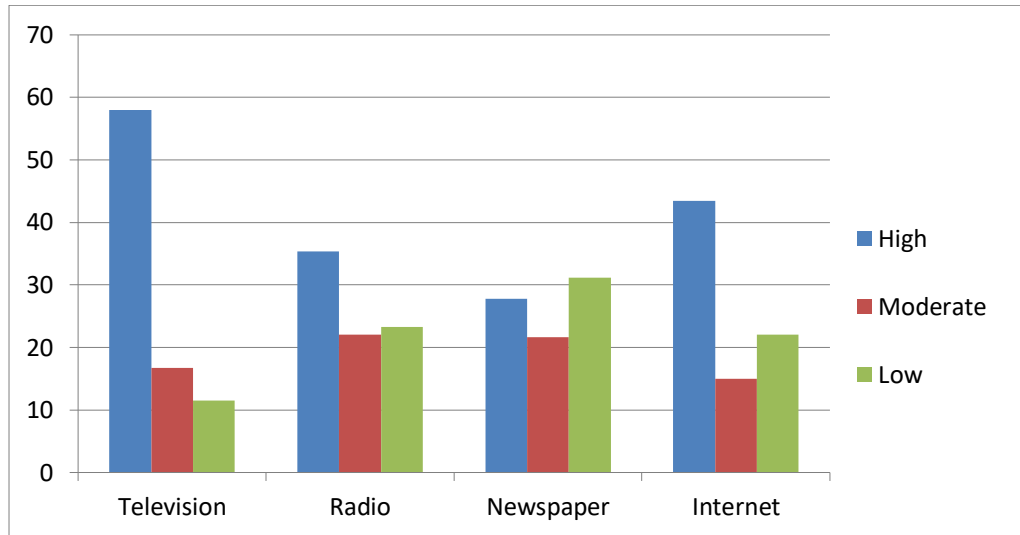
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Age	
21-25 years	22.3%
26-30 years	28.9%
31-35 years	18.5%
36-40 years	10.2%
41-45 years	10.7%
46-50 years	4.6%
51-55 years	2.9%
55 and above	0.5%
Education	
No education	1.8%
Standard 1-6	3.1%
Form 1-3	6.8%
Form 4-5	45.7%
Form 6/Certificate/Diploma	29.8%
Degree	9.8%

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## 5.2. Media Usage among factory workers

Public normally go to media to seek for information on any issues that are deemed as important to a country especially when it is close to general election. For that reason, we first examined the extent to which factory workers use media in their daily life. For each media, we coded responses to the question "Last week, how often did you listen to radio, watch TV, read book and surf internet?" ranging from 0 to 7 days. In order to address this research question, a descriptive analysis was conducted. The results (as shown in Figure 1) show the differences between the levels of media usage among the factory workers. The factory workers are high users of TV (58%) and high users of Internet (43.4%) as these two media were used more frequently than radio (35.4%) and newspaper (27.8%) on a weekly basis. This is due to the nature of the factory workers' job which greatly requires them to work with machines most of the time and to follow a strict standard operation of procedure (SOP) to ensure the quality of products does not leave them a lot of time to use media at the workplace. Despite the lack of media usage at the workplace, the factory workers still consume media at home especially television and Internet to gain information and also entertain themselves. In addition, the fact that the factory workers are less educated and have less income, they therefore are not high users of newspaper and radio.

**Figure 1: Comparison on the degree of usage across the four media**

### 5.3. Media use and public opinion on the country's important issues

RQ2 asked whether media usage significantly predict factory workers' opinions on the country's important issues. We included 11 items of respondents' perception about the country and compared it across the four media: television, radio, newspaper and Internet. The issues measured are: economy, business, job, racial unity, crime, speech freedom, health, education, public cleanliness, daily price and water supply. Multiple Regression analysis was used to answer the research question.

The analysis suggests that television contributes to factory workers' opinion on their perception of the government and significantly influences all the 11 issues measured. The findings suggest that television become the main source of information for factory workers in gaining information about the government. Perhaps high credibility of traditional media is the main factor that contributes to high consumption of television among factory workers while seeking information on the government.

Apart from television, Internet also significantly influences the opinions of factory workers but only on issues related to speech freedom (Beta=.206,  $t=4.359$ ,  $p=.000$ ), health (Beta=.174,  $t=4.359$ ,  $p=.000$ ), quality of education (Beta= .157,  $t=3.355$ ,  $p=.001$ ) and public cleanliness (Beta=.212,  $t=4.475$ ,  $p=.000$ ). This finding is not surprising as it is parallel with the past research findings (Robbin and Buente, 2008), hence supports the notion that new media complement traditional media in information seeking behaviour during general election. We assume that



factory workers are more actively seeking more information from various types of media to fulfil their curiosity about some issues of interest. Internet is considered as the best alternative beside television.

Nonetheless, when comparing the country's issues that are best predicted by the media usage, out of eleven issues measured, only five were strongly influenced by the media usage; namely employment ( $R^2=.701$ ); racial unity ( $R^2=.701$ ); crime ( $R^2=.686$ ); speech freedom ( $R^2=.689$ ); and health ( $R^2=.686$ ).

Due to the limited time factory workers devote to media usage, they only use it to obtain information that could benefit them and those of their interest. Therefore, information related to employment, racial unity, crime, speech freedom and health findings were among issues that attracted them most and that influenced factory workers' opinions.

#### **5.4. Media use and public opinion on government's performance**

We were also interested to know whether media played any significant role on the factory workers' perception of how the government was doing for the country. A multiple regression analysis was performed. Of all the four media studied, television is the most important media which significantly influences all 9 items that are measured on issues related to the government.

Apart from television, another media that significantly influences the factory workers' opinions of issues on the government's performance is the Internet. However, information obtained from the Internet only managed to influence the factory workers on three main issues; the government's ability to decrease crime in the country (Beta=.143,  $t=2.546$ ,  $p=.011$ ), the government's ability to open up more employment opportunities (Beta=.143,  $t=2.455$ ,  $p=.011$ ), and the government's ability to combat the problem of corruption in the country (Beta=.132,  $t=2.350$ ,  $p=.019$ ). The findings indicate that the new media including the Internet, was used to obtain selected information regarding government' performance. This is possibly due to the nature of the Internet which is considered as less credible as compared to traditional media.

#### **5.5. Media and public opinion on Prime Minister's Leadership**

Respondents were asked about their satisfaction towards Najib Abdul Razak as the Prime Minister of the country. The descriptive analysis indicates that 55% of the respondents were satisfied with his leadership. We are also interested to know whether media play roles in the respondents' opinions on this issue. Therefore, our third research question speculated about the media that contribute to factory workers' opinion on their Prime Minister leadership. The result shows the explanatory strength of one media over others, that is television. Television is the best



predictor that determines the influence of media usage on public opinion over issues of the Prime Minister's leadership.

The results also indicate that television influences public opinion differently from one issue to another. Television significantly influenced the opinion of factory workers only on the following leadership issues: the Prime Minister performs well in carrying out his duty (Beta=.696,  $t=13.241$ ,  $p=.000$ ), fulfil promises (Beta=.649,  $t=12.354$ ,  $p=.000$ ), friendly to people (Beta=.647,  $t=12.235$ ,  $p=.000$ ), and alert in administration (Beta=.646,  $t=12.150$ ,  $p=.000$ ). However, the results also indicate regression values ( $R^2$ ) of all items are low. This indicates that media do not contribute to the factory workers' opinions on the Prime Minister's leadership. Factory workers do not heavily rely upon media for any information that is related to the Prime Minister's leadership. On the other hand, sources of information are possibly peers, leaders or words of mouth.

## **6.0. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper provides a glimpse into the role of media on public opinion among factory workers in Malaysia of issues during the country's general election in 2013. How issues in the country viewed by a sample of 615 factory workers in Malaysia represents multiple dimensions of use of media in political engagement. The study provides researchers with insights about how media usage influences the opinions among factory workers on issues of the country. Apparently, television becomes the main source of influence on factory workers' opinions on main and important issues of a country during the general election. Internet falls as the second source of reference that factory workers would refer to obtain any information related to issues of the country. The credibility of television as a source of information and entertainment is well-known and this explains the reason why it is still popular and relevant to the public despite the rapid development of Internet in today's world. Use of media was highest for television and then Internet.

In addition, the choice of media that contributes to public opinion is also dependent on the types of issues. More often than not, some important issues of the country are not reported well in traditional media. McCombs (2002) asserts that mass media highlight certain issues that they need people to know but ignore another issues. As a matter of fact, public will then turn to alternative media to obtain information that is not available in traditional media. In this case, new media replaces the traditional media to influence opinions and views of the public. The study concludes that credibility and reliability of media determines the extent to which it influences public opinion.

This study only covers factories located in Klang valley and they are not representative to wider population. Therefore we suggest that the future study will also cover factories in other parts of Malaysia including Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. In this study, the quantitative research methodology utilised did not provide the opportunity for exploring the depth of issues studied such as the reasons to the lack use of newspapers to obtain information about the Prime Minister's leadership. In the future, we will explore these issues further using qualitative approach specifically in-depth interviews, or a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

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