

Media Monitor on Sibü By-election

1. **Introduction**
2. **Background**
3. **Methodology**
4. **Targets**
5. **Media monitored**
6. **Parameters**
7. **Constraints**
8. **Findings**
9. **Conclusions**

1. Introduction:

This project is part of the election observation project of Sibü Election Watchers (SEW). Since print media remains as the main conveyor of election information to many voters, we intend to monitor the main print media used by the voters in Sibü to assess their relative performance in conveying election information chiefly about the 2 candidates as well as the parties they represent in ways which are consistent with the requirement of a free and fair election. It is by and large a survey on freedom of the press during an election.

2. Background

Media has been credited as the 4th estate –that stands along with the 3 branches of government. As such the media should play its role professionally to live up its exalted expectation from the society. But in reality the media ownership situation do not augur well for a free press when the ownerships are concentrated within the hands of a few families or corporations, as happened in Sarawak specifically as well as Malaysia in general. Media's linkages with political parties add to the shackles on media freedom. These concerns over the context in which Sarawak media operates become the motives for launching this media monitoring effort.

3. Methodology

This media monitor monitored 4 print media over 3 days in the early part of the election campaign period i.e. from May 10th to 12th, to assess their relative objectivity and professionalism in the coverage of the Sibü by-election. The relatively short official campaign period is from May 8th to May 16th. or 8days, the shortest allowable under the Malaysian election law.

4. Targets

1. To assess the relative performance of the 4 media in terms of press coverage on the parties to clarify their relative positions in this; Such ranking is hoped to spur the media owners to improve their performance and to set up a healthy competition among the press to improve service in terms of keeping the readers well informed and to enable them to make informed choices in election;
2. To publish the results ahead of polling to enable the voters to take the press performance into consideration when they vote; The monitor will continue up to polling day where the report will be released in the overall election report;

5. Media monitored

The 4 print media are:

1. See Hua Daily (Chinese, the 2nd biggest circulation Chinese daily in Sarawak)
2. Sin Chew Daily (Chinese, the biggest circulation Chinese daily in Sarawak)
3. United Daily News (Chinese, Miri based)
4. Borneo Post (English, biggest English daily in Sarawak in terms of circulation)

6. Parameters

We scan the paper to locate the following features of the coverage of the parties involved in the Sibuy-election:

1. Number of news items on the 2 parties;
2. Number of news items on the 2 parties on the coloured pages (in contrast to black and white)
3. Relative size of each news item (graded from 1-12, 12 being for full page)
4. Whether each news item has photo as illustration
5. Alignment of news item – whether pro-BN, pro-PR or neutral;
6. Whether the news item is on BN, PR or both)
7. Topic coverage : if the topic is about allocating government fund, government projects, or criticize the opponent;

7. Constraints

Within the human resource and time constraints the media monitor aims at only capturing the main features of media performance in terms of objectivity and professionalism. It does not intend to do a comprehensive quantitative study.

8. Findings

Legend:

BP: Borneo Post

UD: United Daily

SH: See Hua Daily

SC: Sin Chew Daily

Observations:

1. Ranking in terms of news items in colour: the paper rank as follow (with a ratio of 1 as best in terms of balance): Sin Chew Daily > Borneo Post > United Daily > See Hua Daily
2. Overall all papers give more number of news items to BN than PR by notable margin.

Observations:

1. In terms of balance of coverage from the average number of news items on BN and PR over the 3 day period, Sin Chew Daily and United Daily are about equally ranked within margin of errors. Then follow by See Hua Daily and worst performed is Borneo Post.
2. For See Hua Daily and Borneo Post, the news coverage in terms of average number of news items favours BN over PR by a notable margin.
3. While See Hua Daily is not the worst performer on this point, it was noticed that See Hua Daily's daily coverage exhibited a remarkably unusual pattern. This prompted the Media Observation Group to conduct a further analysis on See Hua Daily. The results are presented in Table 3 and Table 4.

Observation:

1. See Hua Daily gave more coverage to PR in terms of number of news items on 1st day and then reversed to give more coverage to BN from 2nd day of study onwards.
2. Overall pattern shows a plunge in the number of news items for both sides on the 2nd day, before the number picked up again on 3rd day.

Observations:

1. In terms of space allocated to the parties See Hua Daily allocated marginally more space to PR on the 1st day and the position was reversed from the 2nd day onwards.
2. The divergence of space allocated to the 2 sides show a more pronounced contrast than the divergence of the number of news items allocated to the 2 sides, with huge advantage favouring BN.

Observations:

1. Again Sin Chew Daily and United Daily are about equally ranked in terms of balance of spaces allocated to BN and PR within margin of errors. This is followed by See Hua Daily and lastly Borneo Post.
2. The spaces allocated to BN and PR shows more pronounced contrast among the 4 paper compared to comparison in terms of the number of news items (Table 1 & 2).

9. Conclusions

1. The rankings of news balance identified here coincide with a subjective assessment of the party alignment of the 4 papers as done by the media monitor members. The index of party alignments to PR vs BN of the 4 papers involved are (1 being most balanced) : United Daily & Sin Chew : 1.09; See Hua : 0.69; Borneo Post: 0.3. BN appears unmistakably as the favoured side in the election judging from the wider deviation from the balanced position at 1.
2. The ranking can perhaps be explained by the relative closeness of the interests of the paper owners to the Sibiu by-election. Both Borneo Post and See Hua Daily are owned by the KTS family, from where the SUPP/BN candidate Robert Lau Hui Yew comes from. The notable difference between the 2 KTS owned papers can perhaps be explained by the bigger competition between the Chinese papers in Sibiu which exert market pressures on the paper to be more balanced relatively. Borneo Post caters to a smaller market with a sole rival being quite far behind in terms of market share. For United Daily and Sin Chew Daily, while also aligned to SUPP, their owners are not directly involved in the election campaign and therefore assume a more balanced posture in their coverage of the election. Sin Chew is owned by one of the giant conglomerates Rimbuan Hijau while United Daily is owned by another conglomerate Shin Yang, both based in Sibiu. Their common political ties to the ruling coalition explain their common bias in favour of BN. If this explanation is correct then their relative neutral position could change when the owners of these papers themselves are involved in election e.g. the coming state elections or general elections.
3. Bias media coverage, as the media monitor confirmed in this study on Sibiu, impinges on the standards of free and fair election. We call upon the SPR to at least reprimand the media operators involved if they cannot take more drastic action on the media operators. To the extent that the voters rely on the paper for election information, bias media would keep voters under-informed of all candidates in the field, and therefore undermine their capacity and opportunity to make fully informed choice. The country will suffer when the wrong choice is made and the pattern replicated across the country. The people and democracy will continue to suffer.
4. There should be change in the legal framework governing media licensing in the country so that there are competitions in the media market which can mitigate against media bias. The

voters and readers should be better served as intelligent citizens who deserve more sophisticated information service befitting the age of democracy. Specifically 2 measures can be targetted to avoidor mitigate against political interference into press freedom:

- a. Abolish the Printing Press Act which require annual renewal of printing licenses;
- b. Ban political parties from owning media including paper.

By:

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