

The Agenda- Setting of Television Channels: 2015 Presidential Election Candidates in Prime Time News Bulletins

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Abstract - The media in Sri Lanka can be broadly placed into two categories- those which are owned and controlled by the State and those which are privately owned and controlled. Many analyses have found that the news media have been unbalanced, especially television channels at the election time, all over the world. However, it seems that the media in Sri Lanka have been used for political promotions. State Media channels directly support the government party candidates. Even though people are expecting balanced news coverage from the media, it is difficult to see that kind of situation in Sri Lankan Society. A scientific research had been needed to study this problem.

There are exiguous researches, has occurred via Sri Lankan media to reveal about Agenda Setting in Prime time News bulletins on political campaigns and its balancing, in the role of politics especially during the time of election. It is apparently few of researches have been conducted about the political background of Sri Lanka. Specially there are no researches conducted for Agenda Setting in Prime Time News Bulletins on Political campaign in Sri Lankan media specially related to the 2015 presidential election. Therefore, this has been a significant study for this research.

This research study carried out primarily based on the content analysis. The main purpose of this study to investigate the Agenda-Setting of Television Channels: 2015 Presidential Election Candidates in Prime Time News Bulletins. In addition to that to find out the content of political campaigns covered by the prime time news bulletins, whether the television channels covered the political campaigns in a balanced way or not and whether the state media and private media have been biased in supporting or opposing a specific candidate. The study has found out that television channels have been unbalanced, while they covered the political campaigns. Not only that the state media have been biased in supporting to the government candidates than private media in Presidential Election 2015.

Keywords: Agenda Setting, Prime Time, Presidential Election, News Bulletin, Television Channels

I. INTRODUCTION

The term communication has resulted from the Latin word “communis” with the meaning of “to share”. Hence, communication is based on expressing information through the exchange of messages, information, and thoughts, as by signals, visuals, writing or behavior. The history of communication dates back to ancient times, that is, Speech was developed some 200,000 years ago, which transformed the human communication and symbols were developed about 30,000 years ago whereas writing about 7,000. Communication is a natural process that communicates messages to the outside world routinely. Without communication, the lives of human beings would be very challengeable by means of communication is critical aspect of growing and maintaining everything around the people.

There is an enormous relationship between communication and the human society. Throughout this long partnership, they have attained a huge growth. It is impossible to have such kind of growth and development without being communicated. In this society, all relationships and social connections rely on the communication. Humans understood the importance of communication after their arrival on earth and developed different communication methods and processes. The development of these processes gave a great enhancement to the development of human society. This is a continuing process as people always want to develop new communication methods and processes. Therefore, it automatically develops the human society.

Communication is the opening of the world. It is a substantial part of giving rise to social changes. During these few decades, the revolution of communication media has supported to hasten the pace of social change. Not only media of Radio, television, newspapers and other mass media have made the world ‘shrunk’ but also have revolutionized the values, attitudes, interests and social milieu. The media are a substantial instrument for expressing the messages to the society. Among the variety of extended media, the news channels are representative of social issues which helps to determine the real world circumstances. Rather, it plays the vital role with the aids of focusing on the social issues in almost every era. Sometimes it gives free and fair chances to explore the issues of society more openly. Therefore, it couldn’t be deprived of issues always raised in order to provide justice to the people. Because of this inherent ability of television channels to reach a large number of public, it is widely used to convey messages with the purpose of building ideas and awareness.

According to the tendency of the audience, there are more television channels are on-air. Those are used a special time duration called prime time; the part of daily broadcast time during which the number of viewers is the highest. It is the peak watching period, which supports of audience to achieve their minds according to the prepared agenda. In here, the agenda setting means the ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda of the channel. The news editors prepare the bulletins; they are suggested to order the news on the basis of importance. The agenda covers areas of how the audience will be treated particular news, which is to be on air, after formulate the format of news; any media tries to order their agenda by giving attention to the special programs in prime time.

Problem Statement

The media in Sri Lanka can be broadly placed into two categories- those which are owned and controlled by the State and those which are privately owned and controlled. Many analyses have

found that the news media have been unbalanced, especially television channels at the election time, all over the world. However, it seems that the media in Sri Lanka have been used for political promotions. State Media channels directly support the government party candidates. Even though people are expecting balanced news coverage from the media, it is difficult to see that kind of situation in Sri Lankan Society. Most Editors and media directors failed to lead their teams in a professional manner that would have ensured balanced news reporting of the election. A scientific research needed to study this problem. This study covers that shortage.

Research Questions

1. How the content of political campaigns covered by the prime time news bulletins in Sri Lankan Television Channels?
2. Have the television channels covered the political campaigns in a balanced way?
3. Do the state media and private media have been biased in supporting or opposing a specific candidate?

Objectives

General Objective

1. To investigate the Agenda- Setting of Television Channels during 2015 Presidential Election Candidates in Prime Time News Bulletins.

Specific Objectives

1. To find out the content of political campaigns covered by the prime time news bulletins.
2. To find out whether the television channels covered the political campaigns in a balanced way or not.
3. To find out whether the state media and private media have been biased in supporting or opposing a specific candidate.

Hypothesis

Television channels have been unbalanced, while they covered the political campaigns. The state media have been biased in supporting to the government candidates than private media in Sri Lankan Presidential Election 2015.

Significance of the Study

Media is an important tool for the existence of communication. When a country is heading to its development, the responsibility assigned to the media is not trumpery. In a multi ethnic and developing country like Sri Lanka, the responsibility assigned to the media is critical. Especially with electronic media play a vital role here. People wish to have a balanced and fair media responsibility for them.

There were two main candidates Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa and ‘Common Opposition candidate’ Mr. Maithripala Sirisena. The election was called by Mr. Rajapaksa two years before it was due because of a slide in his popularity as judged from the recent Provincial Council Elections. It is important to know that he had two more years as President when he called the election. The

importance is that he has claimed, with some strange reasoning, that even if he loses, he will continue as President for two more years if he wins, the two years will be added to the six year term by making it eight years. With the Opposition in disorder and unable to find a credible candidate, Mr. Rajapaksa was so sure of victory that he even said that he would be the only candidate. He failed to see that the possible candidate was Mr. Maithripala Sirisena, his own Health Minister and General Secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party – SLFP).

With no alarm, on 21 November 2014, Mr. Sirisena said that he would be the “Common Opposition Candidate” to contest Mr. Rajapaksa. He blasted the Mr. Rajapaksa regime: Holding the President responsible, he said, “thuggery, embezzlement, crime, drug mafia, nepotism and corruption have institutionalized under the Executive Presidency, but alas President Mr. Rajapaksa or his government has done little to arrest this horrible an The election is more than an attempt at a regime change. It was an attempt to dismantle the Rajapaksa Family autocracy and replace it with something that is more acceptable. It is, by far, one of the most important elections in recent times in Sri Lanka which could have far reaching consequences for the country. Being a contest between two Sinhalese politicians to elect what in effect is a Sinhalese President, there has been some speculation whether this is of any consequence to the Tamil people in the North and East – the suggestion being that they should boycott the election as they did in 2005. However, many Tamils in the North and East wanted to vote. The question was whether they will be able to do so in an area which is an Army-run military state.

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Theoretical Framework (Agenda Setting in Media)

The development of the theoretical framework helps to clarify implicit theory in a manner that is more clearly defined. It helps to consider other possible frameworks and to reduce biases that may sway the interpretation. As develop the theoretical framework researchers will consider alternative theories that might challenge their perspective. They will also consider the limitations associated with their theory, and quite possibly, that their problem could be better understood by other theoretical frameworks.

The theoretical framework is how the researcher conceptualizes the nature of his research problem, its basis and the analysis he will choose to investigate that problem. This framework determines how he perceives, make sense of, and interpret his data. Explanation of the theoretical framework helps the reader understand his perspective and context.

The agenda setting approach was the overall theoretical framework for this study. This theory traced back to Walter Lippmann (1922) who suggested that the media were responsible for the “pictures in our heads”. Agenda-setting theory describes the “ability (of the news media) to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda” That is, if a news item is covered frequently and prominently the audience will regard the issue as more important.

The theory, also known as the Agenda Setting Function of the Mass Media, suggested that the media sets the public agenda by telling you what to think about, although not exactly what to think. The abstract in their first article about this theory states:

“In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues that is, the media may set the “agenda” of the campaign (McCombs, 2003).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research draws on an attempt to address the issue of “The agenda setting of television channels: 2015 presidential election candidates in prime time news bulletins”. The research content is comparatively analyzed by using two television channels; state owned television channels and private owned television channels. In the last few decades, great effort has been devoted to providing ample support for the assertion of related studies to this study.

It showed that the agenda setting influence of the news media on the public usually have focused on public issues. The result obtains by McCombs in the original study of the agenda setting, the influence of the news media was conducted in Chapel Hill, has found similar evidence of strong agenda setting effects public issues. As he claimed there, for the all agendas, the objects are public issues, but they could be other topics, such as the agenda of political candidates during an election, and images held by the public by political candidates are the most obvious examples of attribute agenda setting by news media. And the data yielded by this research provide strong evidences that the appearance of agenda- setting effects require the existence of reasonably free and open media and political system.

“News coverage and treatment in prime time bulletins”, is the most interesting approach to the issue, which was focused on mutual interests and the relationship with ruling political party in prime time news bulletin in selected two television channels with the hypothesis of TV news is not free from political biases. They have firstly revealed that the Bangladesh TV channels emphasize on covering news related to political parties and the government much more than others, some are connected with the two most dominant political parties (Rahman 2009) and some channels never send camera to cover political activities of main opposition party. As indicated in a related study, they have chosen on state-owned TV channel (BTV) and private channel (ATN Bangla) in the country (Bangladesh). It is suggested that the researcher has been tactful to indicate the balanced method of agenda setting by using channels patronized by the state and private. To carry on this study further, researcher focuses on the particular prime time of those news channels.

This study is concerned with the method of propaganda and it is the main theoretical premise behind of this. According to the propaganda model, state-owned TV channel (BTV) controlled by the ruling party and private channel (ATN Bangla) is also disciplined by the government because the channels maintain the liaison with government. So there are overwhelming evidences corroborating the notion that TV channels work on the political biases in their agenda setting on their prime time news bulletins.

There are some certain researches existent, which is related to election campaigns and agenda setting of media, throughout the world. But it is explicit fact that, in Sri Lankan context, there are some exiguous researches appear on the particular area. Especially there are no more researches conducted in the agenda setting of television channels in prime time news bulletins in relation with political campaigns in a Presidential Election.

III. METHODOLOGY

The particular research was conducted with the title of “The Agenda- Setting of Television Channels: 2015 Presidential Election Candidates in Prime Time News Bulletins. In order to carry out the objectives of the research, qualitative and quantitative methodology were employed. Primary data were collected through content analysis with the help of a coding system. In order to apply the data from related and reliable sources, this particular study has used the secondary data gathered from journal articles, books, magazines, research papers, reports, newspapers and web sources and have been applied to the content of the research.

Sample Design

The researcher has been used purposive sampling method for this research. There are 14 news bulletins have been selected and used for the content analysis, which were telecasted before one week from the Presidential Election 2015 (01st of January – 07th of January), from two different kinds of television channels that are related to the State Media (Independence Television Network) and Private Media (Derana Television) in Sri Lanka as the samples of this research.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

Primarily, data gathered through content analysis analyzed and subsequently, comparison and contraction performed. Frequency counting used to find the prominence of reporting on political issues in television channels. And the time duration of the news bulletins measured to see how much time duration allocated. The nature of the news story, the length and the placement of the news analyzed in order to fulfill the objectives of the research.

In media content analysis, a priori design is operationalized in a Coding System. A key component of a Coding System is a comprehensive written Code Book or Coding List. This contains the list of variables (units of analysis) to be researched and provides researchers involved in the project with a consistent framework for conducting the research.

The constant comparative method used to develop concepts from the data by coding and analyzing at the same time. The constant comparative method “combines systematic data collection, coding, and analysis with theoretical sampling in order to generate theory that is integrated, close to the data, and expressed in a form clear enough for further testing” (Conrad, Haworth, Neumann, & Scott, 1993).

Finally, the findings presented in tables and graphs and deepened analysis with statistics. Therefore, data analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

V. RESULTS & CONCLUSION

Through this study, the researcher has found that, before one week of time period for Presidential Election ITN channel has allocated more time in the news content for the campaigns of Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa, the ruling party candidate apart from other candidates especially general candidate Mr. Maithripala Sirisena. Moreover, when ITN sets the agenda in prime time news bulletins, they have given more concentrate on ruling party's campaigns, for instance, their policies, plans and development, defamation and making sympathy.

Especially ITN have allocated time for defamation about an opposition party candidate in primetime news bulletins. As well as, the researcher has found that, when ITN placing the news in agenda of news bulletins, the first priority has given to the campaigns of Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa, the ruling party candidate. In placement of news, the most initial places are given to telecast the news content of ruling party candidate without allocating space for an opposition party. Conversely, when Derana television channel set the agenda in the prime time news bulletin, they have allocated time for news contents of both candidates in the Presidential Election. Even though it seems instability in allocating time, comparatively it has given time for both candidates rather than ITN channel. Furthermore, the researcher has obtained the fact that, when the placement of news on Derana channel, they have given somewhat equal space for each candidate in the agenda of prime time news bulletins.

Not only that, the researcher has obtained a perception that, whether the television channels covered the political campaigns in a balanced way or not, in here, ITN has allocated more time for the news contents of ruling party's campaign rather than the opposition party candidate. The important implication of these findings is that, as the state owned channel, ITN has used unbalanced way in covering news of the opposition party. On the contrary, the Derana television channel has given the time for news content in campaigns of both parties with somewhat balanced way relatively ITN channel.

From the outcome of data analysis, the researcher was able to find whether state media and private media display biasness in supporting or opposing a specific candidate in Presidential Election 2015. In here, the finding has enough to assert that, ITN has exhibited biasness by allocating more time for the news contents in campaigns of ruling party candidate. As well as, within the time allocated to ruling party campaigns, more time has spent to promote defamation against an opposition party candidate. In contrast, Derana television channel has exposed a balanced way without biases for one party. It has been demonstrated that, though ITN has shown a great biasness on ruling party, Derana channel has followed a somewhat unbiased way. In the contemporary society, the media play a significant role as a link. A society is expected that, the media would be performed in their social responsibility in a balanced way especially in the period of election. In here, as the media, television channels have a duty of expressing the reality without being biased for one party. Through this study, the researcher has found that television channels have been unbalanced, while they covered the political campaigns and state media have been biased in supporting to the government candidates than private media. Finally, it is quite convincing to assert that the hypothesis have been proofed in this study.

The media in Sri Lanka can be broadly placed into two categories- those which are owned and controlled by the State and those which are privately owned and controlled. Many analyses have

found that the news media have been unbalanced, especially television channels at the election time, all over the world. However, it seems that the media in Sri Lanka have been used for political promotions. State Media channels directly support the government party candidates. Even though people are expecting balanced news coverage from the media, it is difficult to see that kind of situation in Sri Lankan Society. Most Editors and media directors failed to lead their teams in a professional manner that would have ensured balanced news reporting of the election.

In order to cover the shortage of studying this particular issue the researcher selected two television channels, which are owned by the government and owned and controlled by private section. At the same time the researcher selected the presidential election 2015 as the area for study. Here the researcher paid more attention toward main two candidates those who were gaining more publicity rather than other candidates. The basic purpose of this study was to investigate the Agenda- Setting of Television Channels during 2015 Presidential Election Campaigns in Prime Time News Bulletins. Not only that, to find out the content of political campaigns covered by the prime time news bulletins, whether the television channels covered the political campaigns in a balanced way or not and to find out whether the state media and private media have been biased in supporting or opposing a specific candidate, this study had been carried out.

Through this study, the researcher has found that, before one week of time period for Presidential Election 2015 ITN channel has allocated more time in the news content for the campaigns of Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa, the ruling party candidate apart from other candidates, especially common candidate Mr. Maithripala Sirisena. Especially ITN have allocated time for defamation about an opposition party candidate in primetime news bulletins. As well as, the researcher has found that, when ITN placing the news in agenda of news bulletins, the first priority has given to the campaigns of Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa, the ruling party candidate. In placement of news, the most initial places are given to telecast the news content of ruling party candidate without allocating space for an opposition party.

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VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE RESEARCHERS

- Those who are interested in this particular field of research can apply number of television channels, in order to conduct a research rather than having a limitation for two channels.
- Instead of selecting news bulletins broadcasted in prime time, can look for other all news bulletins.
- Consider of recipient analysis.
- Think of a comparative study with the other elections.

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