

# Tun Hussein Onn's Death: Another Consideration of the News Diffusion Hypothesis

by  
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Past studies on the diffusion of news have been concerned with the role of the mass media and interpersonal communication in providing information about an event to the public. Significant events are said to have been spread by interpersonal contact rather than by the mass media. On the other hand, events that are not highly newsworthy are made more known to the general public by the mass media rather than by interpersonal communication.

This paper on the death of Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Tun Hussein Onn examines the extent to which news related to the event was diffused among the general public. In the current study, a number of issues were raised, such as (a) was the event regarded as significant? (b) what was the pattern of news transmission, and (d) what new information can be added to the studies on news diffusion. In short, the study raises issue related to the regularity hypothesis as forwarded by communication scholars (Deutschmann and Danielson, 1960; DeFleur, 1987; Hill and Bonjean, 1964).

## Background of Study

News diffusion has captured the interests of communication scholars in their attempt to understand how news of a certain event was diffused within a given community. The study on news diffusion has been basically to examine how, why and where people receive information and their related-behaviour on receipt of such an information.

Early studies on news diffusion were prompted by the question on the role of the mass media and interpersonal communication in disseminating information. Scholars were concerned as to whether news was spread faster by the media or by word-of-mouth. If media were to make the initial announcement of an event, what then would be the role of interpersonal vis-a-vis mass communication? Considerations on the two-step flow of information were often invoked in discussing news diffusion.

The first well-known research on a significant but unexpected news event was conducted by Miller when he investigated the flow of news on the

death of President Roosevelt. Miller (1945) found that within an hour after the radio announcement 94% of the campus community studied knew of the event. The news was spread mainly by word-of-mouth after the initial announcement was received over the air.

Another event that became the hall-mark in diffusion studies was on the death of President Kennedy. His assassination resulted in several studies relating to the news diffusion of significant events. It was evident that, like the study on Roosevelt, the findings on the death of Kennedy was somewhat similar. The spread of the news was pervasive, with a high percentage of people knowing about the event within an hour of its occurrence. For example Hill and Bonjean (1964) found that within sixty minutes 93% in Dallas heard of the incident. In another study, Banta (1964) found that 82% learned of the event within an hour. Several other studies indicated a high level of news awareness (Greenberg, 1964; Spitzer 1964-1965; Sheatsley and Feldman, 1964).

The studies on Kennedy's death illustrated the role of personal communication in spreading information much faster than the mass media. Banta (1964) found 76% of the respondents knew it by word-of-mouth, while Hill and Bonjean (1964) found it was 57%; the remaining respondents were listed as obtaining the relevant information from mass media sources.

The assassination attempt on President Reagan was another newsworthy event. Studies by Grantz (1983) and Quarles et al. (1983) found that within 90 minutes, 90% of respondents learned of the news. In this incident the news was mainly transmitted by word-of-mouth but television was closely cited as the second source. The combined percentage suggests that the mass media rather than interpersonal communication played a greater role in spreading the news of the event. Bantz (1983) found that 56% cited the electronic media as their first source of information compared to 45% who mentioned interpersonal communication.

Jeffres and Quarles (1983) found the relevant figures to be 59% and 40%.

A significant event relevant to Malaysia was the study on the death of Malaysia's second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, who passed away while still holding office in a hospital in United Kingdom. The study on how Malaysians in Madison, U.S., learned of the event, found that the news was transmitted fast from personal contact among Malaysians (Idid, 1976).

Another significant news event was on the shooting of Governor George Wallace of Alabama on May 15, 1972. Within less than two hours, 61% heard of the shooting. Out of this total, 54% obtained the news from the radio and 44% from personal acquaintances (Schwartz, 1973/74).

The assassination of the Swedish Prime Minister, Olof Palme, in 1986 was another illustration how news was spread. Since the event happened at around midnight, the majority of Swedes learned of the event only the following morning. Thus like the study on the assassination of Egyptian leader,

Anwar Sadat, whose news reached Malaysia at night (Idid, 1978), time of day affected the pattern of news transmission. Radio was found to be the main transmitter of news in Sweden regarding Palme's death (Weibull et al., 1987), and also among the population in the four Nordic states (Haroldsen, 1987).

The studies conducted on the spread of news relating to the deaths of Roosevelt, Kennedy, Reagan, Palme, Wallace and Abdul Razak and the death attempt on Reagan can be related to the question of significance. That the events were unexpected was not the issue. They were significant because they were political figures whose deaths could cause grave (potential) consequences for the people. The concept of significance was, however, relative. For example the death of the Malaysian Prime Minister was regarded as significant only among Malaysians in Madison but not amongst the Americans, who were grossly ignorant of the event.

Yet another study on the diffusion of an important but unexpected news event was the announcement made by President Johnson that he would not seek re-election and that the bombing of North Vietnam would be reduced. The study by Allen and Colfax (1968) found that within an hour, 82% of the knowers learned of it from the electronic media and 5% knew it by word-of-mouth. It was possible that the source of information could be affected by time since the announcement was first aired at 9.45 p.m.

Not all studies on high newsworthy events were conducted on political figures as scholars had also investigated non-political incidents. An example was the case of the cyanide-laced tylenol event. The Extra-Strength Tylenol incident killed seven Chicago residents between September 29 and October 2, 1982.

The study by Carroci (1983) indicated that the majority of respondents heard the initial news from the electronic media; i.e, 36% from radio and 34% from television, followed by interpersonal communication (27%). On informing others, the study found that 61 out of a total of 221 persons, (28%) said they told no one about the tylenol-related death. A total of 69% respondents told an average of 5 others. Within 24 hours of news of the deaths more than 80% knew about the cyanide-laced Tylenol. Another significant event was the shuttle disaster in which 85% heard about the incident within 60 minutes of its occurrence (Riffe and Stovall, 1989). It was reported that within 15 minutes, the news had reached 58.2% of the population. The study on the diffusion of news of the shuttle disaster also indicated that the majority of respondents received the news from the mass media rather than from interpersonal communication.

In their study, Hill and Bonjean (1964) like Deutschmann and Danielson (1960) earlier, posited that there are certain regularities in the diffusion of news regarding significant news events. The regularity hypothesis was therefore added to the literature regarding news diffusion. Scholars began to probe further into the role of interpersonal communication and its relatedness

to mass communication in spreading information of significant events in line with the hypothesis enunciated.

In his review of literature, Rosengren (1973), discussed several concepts on news diffusion. Over the years, several characteristics can be discerned relating to the diffusion of major news events. After an extensive literature review, Rosengren (1973) reiterated the hypothesis that the higher the news value of an event, the more would people know of the event through interpersonal communication. The news diffusion of significant events was also very rapid.

A study on the diffusion of non-significant news events indicated the reverse characteristics of the regularity hypothesis. In a study on Pope Paul's Encyclical announcement, Adams, Mullen and Wilson (1969) found that the minor event did not diffuse rapidly. The role of interpersonal communication was indeed minimal.

Time of day is a factor that affects knowledge of the event. When the news event was heard at night, media, rather than word-of-mouth were cited as the major source of information. The news on the marriage of the Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, was rapidly spread by television, and reached two thirds of its audience within 15 minutes (Fathi, 1973). Among those who obtained the news, a total of 77% heard it over radio or television.

Another feature on Trudeau's marriage was that news was announced at night. Fathi's study indicated that the electronic media far surpassed the interpersonal channel in spreading the news during the night.

A study to illustrate a not-so-significant event was the diffusion of Senator Taft's death. Although the news was reported in the morning, the news diffusion was very slow. Although radio was the dominant source of information the study by Larson and Hill (1954) regarding Taft's death found that 90% of the faculty community and the labouring class heard of it 11 hours and 14 hours after the event had passed respectively. There was therefore a difference in how two given socio-economic classes differed in knowing an event. The study also suggested that a non-significant event would diffuse slowly in any given community.

Past studies have accepted the regularity hypothesis to explain the news diffusion of significant events with the proviso that the pattern would be affected somewhat by time factor, that is if it were announced at night. This study probed the characteristics of the news transmission to examine whether they were in consonance with the regularity hypothesis that had been subscribed to by several scholars (Deutschmann and Danielson, 1960; De Fleur, 1987; Hill and Bonjean, 1964).

### **Present Study**

Tun Hussein Onn, Malaysia's third Prime Minister, passed away in the United

States after undergoing heart surgery. Tun Hussein Onn had been in poor health even when he was still in office. In fact, health was the reason given when he stepped down from office. He passed away on 29 May, 1990. Tun Hussein Onn was a very respected person.

In this study, the aim was to find out how Malaysians throughout the country knew of the event. In previous studies in Malaysia, the areas of study were limited to certain localities, either in certain urban or rural areas. In the study on the diffusion of news on (Egyptian) Anwar Sadat's death the study focused on only one campus community (Idid, 1983).

When the first public announcement was made over radio Malaysia at 9 a.m. that Tun Hussein Onn had passed away, a decision was made to probe how Malaysians learned about the death of the former politician. Radio and Television Malaysia, TV3 and all newspapers gave full coverage to the death of Tun Hussein Onn.

The present study involved 408 respondents throughout the country. Out of this, 55% were males. The respondents consisted of 41% Malays, 39% Chinese, 14% Indians and 6% others.

Communication students enrolled in the Research Methodology class were told to select by quota sampling four respondents of certain race, sex and age in their localities selected throughout the country. The respondents were given administered questionnaire that lasted about 15 minutes. The questionnaire obtained respondents socio-demographic background, time and place they heard of Tun Hussein's death and what they did on receipt of the news. The interviews were conducted a week after Hussein Onn's death.

### **Media habits of respondents**

The study found that the respondents were high newspaper and TV users. A total of 67% read the newspapers everyday and 58% watched TV daily. On radio listening, 32% listened to it daily and 21% did not listen to it at all.

### **Findings**

There was widespread awareness that Hussein Onn had passed away. A total of 381 respondents (93.4%) knew about the event. A total of 51.1% of them became aware of the event on the first day the announcement was made on the demise (29 May, 1990). Another 38.3% knew of the event the second day and 4.1% by the third day.

It was to be noted also that one hour after the public announcement (by 10 a.m) on the first day, a total of 14.2% had heard the news. A total of 20% heard the news by noon the same day, that is three hours after the first announcement was made. The news then remained somewhat stabilised until 8 p.m. when another 27.5% of the respondents heard on the prime television news.

In terms of race, 19.3% of the Malays knew of the death by noon, compared to 19% of the Chinese, 22.8% of the Indians and 25% among others, indicating that there was no difference among the Malays and Chinese but a slight difference compared to the Indians and others in learning the news. On the other hand, it was found that by midnight on the first day, more Indians (57.9%) and Others (58.3%) knew of the event compared to the Malays (49.7%) and Chinese (49.4%).

There was a difference among males and females who knew the event. A total of 21.9% of males learned of the event by noon compared to 17.8% among the females. By the end of the first day, 52.2% of males and 49.1% of females were aware of the event.

Spread of the news across the country was uneven. Respondents in some states learned earlier of the event than the others. The majority of respondents who heard the news by noon were from Kuala Lumpur (72%), Selangor (20.6%), Perak (30.8%) and Pahang (30.3%), states that were close to the Federal Capital, Kuala Lumpur. In the other states, the majority learned of the event in the afternoon.

The study found that by midnight on the first day or 16 hours after the first formal announcement, a total of 51.1% of the respondents heard of the event. Among the races, for the same period of time, 49.7% Malays, 49.4% Chinese, 57.9% Indians and 58.3% of Others knew of the event. It was a slow spread compared to other significant events.

The locations the respondents learned of the news were also investigated. The majority (67.3%) received the news when at home, 27% while at office, 4% while in the car and 3% from various places. Among the Malays, Chinese and Indians and Others 67.3%, 66.7% and 73% respectively heard the news while at home.

### **First Source of Information**

Respondents were asked from which source they first heard about the event. Four sources were given for respondents to choose from, namely newspapers, radio, television and interpersonal communication. The study found that 26% each heard about the event from word-of-mouth and radio, 25% from TV, 21% read it in the newspapers and 1.5% from other sources (Table 1).

Among the races, 31.5% of the Malays cited radio as the first source of information. A total of 27.4% cited word-of-mouth, 26.8% TV and 13.1% newspapers. With the Chinese respondents, 31.6% obtained their initial information from newspapers, 25.3% from TV, 24.1% from word-of-mouth and 15.2% from radio, (Table 1).

As for the Indian and Others 33.3% and 26.1% obtained their first information from the radio, 22.8% and 34.8% from word-of-mouth for both the groups. Table 1 indicates that 17.5% of the Indians and 8.7% of Others

learned of the event from the newspapers, and 17.5% and 30.4% from television.

**TABLE 1: Source of First Information: Answers in Percentage by Race And Sex**

	Interpersonal	Newspaper	Radio	TV	Others	NR
All Respondents N = 408	26.2	21.1	26.0	25.2	1.5	
Malays N = 168	27.4	13.1	31.5	26.8	0.6	0.6
Chinese N = 158	24.1	31.6	15.2	25.3	2.5	1.3
Indians N = 57	22.8	17.5	33.3	17.5	1.8	7.1
Others N = 23	34.8	8.7	26.1	30.4		
Males N = 224	24.6	24.6	26.1	23.2	1.3	0.2
Females N = 183	27.9	15.8	25.7	27.3	1.8	1.5

There was little difference reported between males and females. A total of 24.6% of the males and 27.9% females obtained their first information on the death of Tun Hussein Onn from interpersonal sources.

A total of 26.1% each of the males and 25.7% of females obtained the first information about the event from radio; while 24.6% of the males and 15.8% females cited the newspapers. Another 23.2% of the males and 27.3% of the females obtained information from television.

#### **Seeking For Additional Information**

A total of 59.3% reported that on hearing the news of Hussein Onn's death, they searched for additional information. Out of the total number of respondents who did so, 38% obtained it by reading the newspapers, 29% from TV and 18% from radio. It was clear that the mass media became the

source of additional information.

A breakdown in race indicates that amongst the sexes in seeking for additional information. A total of 60% males and 59.4% females sought for additional information.

**TABLE 2: Seeking for Additional Information Among the Races**

Race	Yes	No
Malays	62.9	37.1
Chinese	55.5	44.5
Indians	61.1	38.9
Others	65.2	34.8
All	59.3	40.7

*Informing others:* Majority of the respondents (67%) informed others about the event. A total of 36% informed one to three others about the death of Hussein Onn. When analysed according to race, 73.2% of the Malays, 63.2% of the Chinese, 72.2% of the Indians and 78.3% of Others reacted by spreading the news to others.

*On being informed:* While there was information giving, there was also information receiving. A total of 67% were informed by others. The study found that 44% of the respondents were informed of the news by 1 to 4 others. Among the races, 71% of the Malays, 66% of the Chinese and 77% each of the Indians and Others were informed by others. As for the sexes, 70% of the males and 68% of the females were informed by others.

### Discussion

The present findings indicate that Tun Hussein's death was spread rapidly among Malaysians. Within one hour of a public announcement on the air, a total of 14.2% heard of the event. The percentage of respondents who heard the news was 20% three hours later. By the end of the day 51% heard of the event.

There was no difference among the Malays and Chinese in knowing the news but a slight difference exists for Indians and Others. There was, however, a slight difference in knowing the event among males and females.

Majority of respondents learned of the event from the electronic media (26% from radio and 25% from tv). There was, however, a difference among races in citing the various media as first source. While Malays and Indians cited radio as the first source (31.5% and 33.3% respectively) a large per-

centage of Chinese (31.6%) obtained news of the event from the newspapers.

Many studies on unexpected but significant events over the years have helped in generalising certain features on transmitting news of these events. Significant events have been characterised by banner headlines in the newspapers or the headlines in the news programmes of the electronic media. There was no exception in the present study where the mass media gave wide coverage on the death of Tun Hussein Onn.

Earlier studies had suggested that despite the high media penetration in the United States, people had relied on interpersonal communication to transmit news of significant events. This is evident in news related to the deaths of Roosevelt and Kennedy. Studies on significant news event in later years have suggested that the electronic media began to compete in importance to the interpersonal means of communication in transmitting news of significant events. One such example was the transmission of news on the assassination attempt of Reagan.

The Malaysian data on news diffusion of the death of Tun Abdul Razak (Idid, 1976) and the death of the sixth Malaysian King (1981) provided evidence that despite the absence of banner headlines, the news of the two events was spread widely by word-of-mouth. Mention was made that more respondents knew of the events by word-of-mouth than by the mass media. The study on Tun Abdul Razak's death was made amongst Malaysian students living in a foreign country. There was, therefore, little or nothing about the event that was transmitted by the electronic media or even by the print media as the main community (the American community) did not deem the event as significant.

On the Malaysian King's death, the study was made in an urban area in the district of Petaling Jaya. Protocol was involved that affected the manner and timing of the announcement.

No public announcement was made until all heads of states in Malaysia were informed regarding the royal death. In the meantime before an official announcement could be made over the electronic media, Quranic verses were recited over radio. This indicated that someone important had passed away. Since there was no announcement made, people became very curious to know who had died. Interpersonal communication was the only means of obtaining information in such a situation. Other studies, however, provided a different picture on the spread of significant events. From the studies on Roosevelt, the death attempts on Wallace and Reagan, the shuttle disaster and the present study, it could be deduced that people obtained their news of significant events from the electronic media and by word-of-mouth. Media have penetrated deep into the lives of the people that they are always around to provide information. With the electronic media operating all through the day and night (with the exception of some European countries and developing nations), information on all newsworthy matters could be heard immedi-

ately by the audience. In the days of Miller and Roosevelt, people heard the news over radio and spread it to others. In today's world, people obtain news of significant events from the electronic media but by the time they repeat the news to others they would have found that others have already obtained the news from the same source.

In this study, news of Tun Hussein Onn's death was transmitted by radio, television and word-of-mouth but more people heard of the former Prime Minister's death from the electronic media than from word-of-mouth or from the printed media.

If one were to accept the regularity hypothesis that news of significant events was spread mainly by interpersonal communication then the corollary holds true of Tun Hussein Onn's death; that the event was not significant to be transmitted by word-of-mouth. This, of course denies the acceptance of Hussein Onn's death as significant despite the headlines given to it by the newspapers and the electronic media.

Two reasons might perhaps account for the heavier reliance on the mass media than interpersonal communication for Tun Hussein Onn's death. One reason was the pervasiveness of the media in Malaysian society and their reliance among Malaysians for seeking information.

The pervasiveness of media in the United States also accounted for some differences in the findings on the death of Kennedy and the attempt on Reagan's life compared to that on Roosevelt. In the days of Roosevelt the spread of the electronic media was not as pervasive as during Kennedy or Reagan's time. The electronic media were more pervasive after the days of Kennedy. People could obtain information readily from the electronic media more than they could obtain information from friends and neighbours.

Thus in comparing the sources of news, it was evident that the electronic media showed the greatest increase as the first source of information during the study made on the assassination attempt on Reagan and on the shuttle disaster.

Table 3 indicates that the percentage of people who learned of Reagan's assassination attempt through interpersonal communication was less than those who heard it over radio and television. Even the studies on Kennedy's death indicated that the percentage of those who learned of the event by word-of-mouth was slightly more than those who heard of it from radio or television.

The findings on Reagan's death attempt was an indication that the electronic media, especially that of television, were important for people to rely on for information. The shuttle disaster study made the reliance on television more obvious than people's dependence on interpersonal communication. The present study supports the thesis that people are more likely to learn news of significant events from the media than from other people.

In summary, while interpersonal communication may speed up the transmission of news, people still obtain first news of significant events from the electronic media.

**TABLE 3: Summary of Relevant Findings of Significant Events**

EVENT	STUDY	FIRST SOURCE (IN PERCENTAGE)				
		RADIO	TV	PEOPLE	OTHER	NP
Roosevelt's death	Miller (1945)	11.2	-	87.4	-	1.4
Kennedy's death	Hill + Bonjean (1964)	17	26	57	-	-
	Sheatsley & Feldman (1964)	47 (Radio + TV)		49	4 (and news-paper)	-
Shooting of Wallace	Schwartz (1972/73)	34.5	30	34.5	-	-
Reagan's Assassination Attempt	Gantz (1983)	23	33	45	-	-
	Jeffres + Quarles (1983)	25	34	40	-	-
	Bantz et al. (1983)	22.3	18.9	57.6	1.2	-
Cynide-laced Tylenol case	Carroci (1983)	36.0	34.0	27.0	-	-
Shuttle Disaster 1989	Riffe + Stovall 1989	19.0	53.7	22.6	4.7	-
Hussein Onn's Death 1992	present study 1992	26.0	25.2	26.2	0.5	21.1

The present findings may well illustrate the greater role of the electronic media- or to be more precise, television - over interpersonal communication in the transmission of significant events. Previous studies, especially that by Miller (1945) were done in situations where television was not pervasive or not in existence. Such successive studies on news diffusion of significant events (Reagan, Shuttle Disaster) suggest that television is a major medium in transmitting significant news. Television programmes are available almost every hour in the day and night (or at least until midnight) in many countries that people can tune on to when there is news to be ob-

tained. Radio has lost its popularity but when significant events occur during the day it assumes some degree of importance.

Newspapers are constrained by deadlines (imposed by technology) that makes it near impossible to provide news of events that happen after its deadline. Given the high media presence in today's society a case is made in this study to take another look at the regularity hypothesis with regard to the diffusion of news events.

The regularity hypothesis states that news of significant event is transmitted more by interpersonal rather than by the mass media given the changes obtained in the media situation. Recent findings and reevaluation of studies related to news diffusion, another consideration of the regularity hypothesis is therefore required. As the present findings suggest a significant news event is spread by the electronic media more than by the print or interpersonal means of communication.

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## Background of Study

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Another significant news event was on the shooting of Governor George Wallace of Alabama on May 15, 1972. Within less than two hours, 61% heard of the shooting. Out of this total, 54% obtained the news from the radio and 44% from personal acquaintances (Schwartz, 1973/74).

The assassination of the Swedish Prime Minister, Olof Palme, in 1986 was another illustration how news was spread. Since the event happened around midnight, the majority of Swedes learned of the event only the following morning. Thus like the study on the assassination of Egyptian leader,

Anwar Sadat, whose news reached Malaysia at night (Idid, 1978), time of day affected the pattern of news transmission. Radio was found to be the main transmitter of news in Sweden regarding Palme's death (Weibull et al., 1987), and also among the population in the four Nordic states (Haroldsen, 1987).

The studies conducted on the spread of news relating to the deaths of Roosevelt, Kennedy, Reagan, Palme, Wallace and Abdul Razak and the death attempt on Reagan can be related to the question of significance. That the events were unexpected was not the issue. They were significant because they were political figures whose deaths could cause grave (potential) consequences for the people. The concept of significance was, however, relative. For example the death of the Malaysian Prime Minister was regarded as significant only among Malaysians in Madison but not amongst the Americans, who were grossly ignorant of the event.

Yet another study on the diffusion of an important but unexpected news event was the announcement made by President Johnson that he would not seek re-election and that the bombing of North Vietnam would be reduced. The study by Allen and Colfax (1968) found that within an hour, 82% of the knowers learned of it from the electronic media and 5% knew it by word-of-mouth. It was possible that the source of information could be affected by time since the announcement was first aired at 9.45 p.m.

Not all studies on high newsworthy events were conducted on political figures as scholars had also investigated non-political incidents. An example was the case of the cyanide-laced tylenol event. The Extra-Strength Tylenol incident killed seven Chicago residents between September 29 and October 1, 1982.

The study by Carroci (1983) indicated that the majority of respondents heard the initial news from the electronic media; i.e. 36% from radio and 44% from television, followed by interpersonal communication (27%). On informing others, the study found that 61 out of a total of 221 persons, (28%) said they told no one about the tylenol-related death. A total of 69% respondents told an average of 5 others. Within 24 hours of news of the deaths more than 80% knew about the cyanide-laced Tylenol. Another significant event was the shuttle disaster in which 85% heard about the incident within 60 minutes of its occurrence (Riffe and Stovall, 1989). It was reported that within 15 minutes, the news had reached 58.2% of the population. The study on the diffusion of news of the shuttle disaster also indicated that the majority of respondents received the news from the mass media rather than from interpersonal communication.

In their study, Hill and Bonjean (1964) like Deutschmann and Danielson (1960) earlier, posited that there are certain regularities in the diffusion of news regarding significant news events. The regularity hypothesis was therefore added to the literature regarding news diffusion. Scholars began to probe further into the role of interpersonal communication and its relatedness

to mass communication in spreading information of significant events in line with the hypothesis enunciated.

In his review of literature, Rosengren (1973), discussed several concepts on news diffusion. Over the years, several characteristics can be discerned relating to the diffusion of major news events. After an extensive literature review, Rosengren (1973) reiterated the hypothesis that the higher the news value of an event, the more would people know of the event through interpersonal communication. The news diffusion of significant events was also very rapid.

A study on the diffusion of non-significant news events indicated the reverse characteristics of the regularity hypothesis. In a study on Pope Paul's Encyclical announcement, Adams, Mullen and Wilson (1969) found that the minor event did not diffuse rapidly. The role of interpersonal communication was indeed minimal.

Time of day is a factor that affects knowledge of the event. When the news event was heard at night, media, rather than word-of-mouth were cited as the major source of information. The news on the marriage of the Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, was rapidly spread by television, and reached two thirds of its audience within 15 minutes (Fathi, 1973). Among those who obtained the news, a total of 77% heard it over radio or television.

Another feature on Trudeau's marriage was that news was announced at night. Fathi's study indicated that the electronic media far surpassed the interpersonal channel in spreading the news during the night.

A study to illustrate a not-so-significant event was the diffusion of Senator Taft's death. Although the news was reported in the morning, the news diffusion was very slow. Although radio was the dominant source of information the study by Larson and Hill (1954) regarding Taft's death found that 90% of the faculty community and the labouring class heard of it 11 hours and 14 hours after the event had passed respectively. There was therefore a difference in how two given socio-economic classes differed in knowing an event. The study also suggested that a non-significant event would diffuse slowly in any given community.

Past studies have accepted the regularity hypothesis to explain the news diffusion of significant events with the proviso that the pattern would be affected somewhat by time factor, that is if it were announced at night. This study probed the characteristics of the news transmission to examine whether they were in consonance with the regularity hypothesis that had been subscribed to by several scholars (Deutschmann and Danielson, 1960; De Fleur, 1987; Hill and Bonjean, 1964).

### **Present Study**

Tun Hussein Onn, Malaysia's third Prime Minister, passed away in the United

States after undergoing heart surgery. Tun Hussein Onn had been in poor health even when he was still in office. In fact, health was the reason given when he stepped down from office. He passed away on 29 May, 1990. Tun Hussein Onn was a very respected person.

In this study, the aim was to find out how Malaysians throughout the country knew of the event. In previous studies in Malaysia, the areas of study were limited to certain localities, either in certain urban or rural areas. In the study on the diffusion of news on (Egyptian) Anwar Sadat's death the study focused on only one campus community (Idid, 1983).

When the first public announcement was made over radio Malaysia at 9 a.m. that Tun Hussein Onn had passed away, a decision was made to probe how Malaysians learned about the death of the former politician. Radio and Television Malaysia, TV3 and all newspapers gave full coverage to the death of Tun Hussein Onn.

The present study involved 408 respondents throughout the country. Out of this, 55% were males. The respondents consisted of 41% Malays, 39% Chinese, 14% Indians and 6% others.

Communication students enrolled in the Research Methodology class were told to select by quota sampling four respondents of certain race, sex and age in their localities selected throughout the country. The respondents were given administered questionnaire that lasted about 15 minutes. The questionnaire obtained respondents socio-demographic background, time and place they heard of Tun Hussein's death and what they did on receipt of the news. The interviews were conducted a week after Hussein Onn's death.

### **Media habits of respondents**

The study found that the respondents were high newspaper and TV users. A total of 67% read the newspapers everyday and 58% watched TV daily. On radio listening, 32% listened to it daily and 21% did not listen to it at all.

### **Findings**

There was widespread awareness that Hussein Onn had passed away. A total of 381 respondents (93.4%) knew about the event. A total of 51.1% of them became aware of the event on the first day the announcement was made on the demise (29 May, 1990). Another 38.3% knew of the event the second day and 4.1% by the third day.

It was to be noted also that one hour after the public announcement (by 10 a.m) on the first day, a total of 14.2% had heard the news. A total of 20% heard the news by noon the same day, that is three hours after the first announcement was made. The news then remained somewhat stabilised until 8 p.m. when another 27.5% of the respondents heard on the prime television news.

In terms of race, 19.3% of the Malays knew of the death by noon, compared to 19% of the Chinese, 22.8% of the Indians and 25% among others, indicating that there was no difference among the Malays and Chinese but a slight difference compared to the Indians and others in learning the news. On the other hand, it was found that by midnight on the first day, more Indians (57.9%) and Others (58.3%) knew of the event compared to the Malays (49.7%) and Chinese (49.4%).

There was a difference among males and females who knew the event. A total of 21.9% of males learned of the event by noon compared to 17.8% among the females. By the end of the first day, 52.2% of males and 49.1% of females were aware of the event.

Spread of the news across the country was uneven. Respondents in some states learned earlier of the event than the others. The majority of respondents who heard the news by noon were from Kuala Lumpur (72%), Selangor (20.6%), Perak (30.8%) and Pahang (30.3%), states that were close to the Federal Capital, Kuala Lumpur. In the other states, the majority learned of the event in the afternoon.

The study found that by midnight on the first day or 16 hours after the first formal announcement, a total of 51.1% of the respondents heard of the event. Among the races, for the same period of time, 49.7% Malays, 49.4% Chinese, 57.9% Indians and 58.3% of Others knew of the event. It was a slow spread compared to other significant events.

The locations the respondents learned of the news were also investigated. The majority (67.3%) received the news when at home, 27% while at office, 4% while in the car and 3% from various places. Among the Malays, Chinese and Indians and Others 67.3%, 66.7% and 73% respectively heard the news while at home.

### First Source of Information

Respondents were asked from which source they first heard about the event. Four sources were given for respondents to choose from, namely newspapers, radio, television and interpersonal communication. The study found that 26% each heard about the event from word-of-mouth and radio, 25% from TV, 21% read it in the newspapers and 1.5% from other sources (Table 1).

Among the races, 31.5% of the Malays cited radio as the first source of information. A total of 27.4% cited word-of-mouth, 26.8% TV and 13.1% newspapers. With the Chinese respondents, 31.6% obtained their initial information from newspapers, 25.3% from TV, 24.1% from word-of-mouth and 15.2% from radio, (Table 1).

As for the Indian and Others 33.3% and 26.1% obtained their first information from the radio, 22.8% and 34.8% from word-of-mouth for both the groups. Table 1 indicates that 17.5% of the Indians and 8.7% of Others

learned of the event from the newspapers, and 17.5% and 30.4% from television.

**TABLE 1: Source of First Information: Answers in Percentage by Race And Sex**

	Interpersonal	Newspaper	Radio	TV	Others	NR
All Respondents N = 408	26.2	21.1	26.0	25.2	1.5	
Malays N = 168	27.4	13.1	31.5	26.8	0.6	0.6
Chinese N = 158	24.1	31.6	15.2	25.3	2.5	1.3
Indians N = 57	22.8	17.5	33.3	17.5	1.8	7.1
Others N = 23	34.8	8.7	26.1	30.4		
Males N = 224	24.6	24.6	26.1	23.2	1.3	0.2
Females N = 183	27.9	15.8	25.7	27.3	1.8	1.5

There was little difference reported between males and females. A total of 24.6% of the males and 27.9% females obtained their first information on the death of Tun Hussein Onn from interpersonal sources.

A total of 26.1% each of the males and 25.7% of females obtained the first information about the event from radio; while 24.6% of the males and 15.8% females cited the newspapers. Another 23.2% of the males and 27.3% of the females obtained information from television.

#### **Seeking For Additional Information**

A total of 59.3% reported that on hearing the news of Hussein Onn's death, they searched for additional information. Out of the total number of respondents who did so, 38% obtained it by reading the newspapers, 29% from TV and 18% from radio. It was clear that the mass media became the

source of additional information.

A breakdown in race indicates that amongst the sexes in seeking for additional information. A total of 60% males and 59.4% females sought for additional information.

**TABLE 2: Seeking for Additional Information Among the Races**

Race	Yes	No
Malays	62.9	37.1
Chinese	55.5	44.5
Indians	61.1	38.9
Others	65.2	34.8
All	59.3	40.7

*Informing others:* Majority of the respondents (67%) informed others about the event. A total of 36% informed one to three others about the death of Hussein Onn. When analysed according to race, 73.2% of the Malays, 63.2% of the Chinese, 72.2% of the Indians and 78.3% of Others reacted by spreading the news to others.

*On being informed:* While there was information giving, there was also information receiving. A total of 67% were informed by others. The study found that 44% of the respondents were informed of the news by 1 to 4 others. Among the races, 71% of the Malays, 66% of the Chinese and 77% each of the Indians and Others were informed by others. As for the sexes, 70% of the males and 68% of the females were informed by others.

### Discussion

The present findings indicate that Tun Hussein's death was spread rapidly among Malaysians. Within one hour of a public announcement on the air, a total of 14.2% heard of the event. The percentage of respondents who heard the news was 20% three hours later. By the end of the day 51% heard of the event.

There was no difference among the Malays and Chinese in knowing the news but a slight difference exists for Indians and Others. There was however, a slight difference in knowing the event among males and females.

Majority of respondents learned of the event from the electronic media (26% from radio and 25% from tv). There was, however, a difference among races in citing the various media as first source. While Malays and Indians cited radio as the first source (31.5% and 33.3% respectively) a large per-

centage of Chinese (31.6%) obtained news of the event from the newspapers.

Many studies on unexpected but significant events over the years have helped in generalising certain features on transmitting news of these events. Significant events have been characterised by banner headlines in the newspapers or the headlines in the news programmes of the electronic media. There was no exception in the present study where the mass media gave wide coverage on the death of Tun Hussein Onn.

Earlier studies had suggested that despite the high media penetration in the United States, people had relied on interpersonal communication to transmit news of significant events. This is evident in news related to the deaths of Roosevelt and Kennedy. Studies on significant news event in later years have suggested that the electronic media began to compete in importance to the interpersonal means of communication in transmitting news of significant events. One such example was the transmission of news on the assassination attempt of Reagan.

The Malaysian data on news diffusion of the death of Tun Abdul Razak (Idid, 1976) and the death of the sixth Malaysian King (1981) provided evidence that despite the absence of banner headlines, the news of the two events was spread widely by word-of-mouth. Mention was made that more respondents knew of the events by word-of-mouth than by the mass media. The study on Tun Abdul Razak's death was made amongst Malaysian students living in a foreign country. There was, therefore, little or nothing about the event that was transmitted by the electronic media or even by the print media as the main community (the American community) did not deem the event as significant.

On the Malaysian King's death, the study was made in an urban area in the district of Petaling Jaya. Protocol was involved that affected the manner and timing of the announcement.

No public announcement was made until all heads of states in Malaysia were informed regarding the royal death. In the meantime before an official announcement could be made over the electronic media, Quranic verses were recited over radio. This indicated that someone important had passed away. Since there was no announcement made, people became very curious to know who had died. Interpersonal communication was the only means of obtaining information in such a situation. Other studies, however, provided a different picture on the spread of significant events. From the studies on Roosevelt, the death attempts on Wallace and Reagan, the shuttle disaster and the present study, it could be deduced that people obtained their news of significant events from the electronic media and by word-of-mouth. Media have penetrated deep into the lives of the people that they are always around to provide information. With the electronic media operating all through the day and night (with the exception of some European countries and developing nations), information on all newsworthy matters could be heard immedi-

ately by the audience. In the days of Miller and Roosevelt, people heard the news over radio and spread it to others. In today's world, people obtain news of significant events from the electronic media but by the time they repeat the news to others they would have found that others have already obtained the news from the same source.

In this study, news of Tun Hussein Onn's death was transmitted by radio, television and word-of-mouth but more people heard of the former Prime Minister's death from the electronic media than from word-of-mouth or from the printed media.

If one were to accept the regularity hypothesis that news of significant events was spread mainly by interpersonal communication then the corollary holds true of Tun Hussein Onn's death; that the event was not significant to be transmitted by word-of-mouth. This, of course denies the acceptance of Hussein Onn's death as significant despite the headlines given to it by the newspapers and the electronic media.

Two reasons might perhaps account for the heavier reliance on the mass media than interpersonal communication for Tun Hussein Onn's death. One reason was the pervasiveness of the media in Malaysian society and their reliance among Malaysians for seeking information.

The pervasiveness of media in the United States also accounted for some differences in the findings on the death of Kennedy and the attempt on Reagan's life compared to that on Roosevelt. In the days of Roosevelt the spread of the electronic media was not as pervasive as during Kennedy or Reagan's time. The electronic media were more pervasive after the days of Kennedy. People could obtain information readily from the electronic media more than they could obtain information from friends and neighbours.

Thus in comparing the sources of news, it was evident that the electronic media showed the greatest increase as the first source of information during the study made on the assassination attempt on Reagan and on the shuttle disaster.

Table 3 indicates that the percentage of people who learned of Reagan's assassination attempt through interpersonal communication was less than those who heard it over radio and television. Even the studies on Kennedy's death indicated that the percentage of those who learned of the event by word-of-mouth was slightly more than those who heard of it from radio or television.

The findings on Reagan's death attempt was an indication that the electronic media, especially that of television, were important for people to rely on for information. The shuttle disaster study made the reliance on television more obvious than people's dependence on interpersonal communication. The present study supports the thesis that people are more likely to learn news of significant events from the media than from other people.

In summary, while interpersonal communication may speed up the transmission of news, people still obtain first news of significant events from the electronic media.

**TABLE 3: Summary of Relevant Findings of Significant Events**

EVENT	STUDY	FIRST SOURCE (IN PERCENTAGE)				
		RADIO	TV	PEOPLE	OTHER	NP
Roosevelt's death	Miller (1945)	11.2	-	87.4	-	1.4
Kennedy's death	Hill + Bonjean (1964)	17	26	57	-	-
	Sheatsley & Feldman (1964)	47 (Radio + TV)		49	4 (and news-paper)	-
Shooting of Wallace	Schwartz (1972/73)	34.5	30	34.5	-	-
Reagan's Assassination Attempt	Gantz (1983)	23	33	45	-	-
	Jeffres + Quarles (1983)	25	34	40	-	-
	Bantz et al. (1983)	22.3	18.9	57.6	1.2	-
Cynide-laced Tylenol case	Carroci (1983)	36.0	34.0	27.0	-	-
Shuttle Disaster 1989	Riffe + Stovall 1989	19.0	53.7	22.6	4.7	-
Hussein Onn's Death 1992	present study 1992	26.0	25.2	26.2	0.5	21.1

The present findings may well illustrate the greater role of the electronic media- or to be more precise, television - over interpersonal communication in the transmission of significant events. Previous studies, especially that by Miller (1945) were done in situations where television was not pervasive or not in existence. Such successive studies on news diffusion of significant events (Reagan, Shuttle Disaster) suggest that television is a major medium in transmitting significant news. Television programmes are available almost every hour in the day and night (or at least until midnight) in many countries that people can tune on to when there is news to be ob-

tained. Radio has lost its popularity but when significant events occur during the day it assumes some degree of importance.

Newspapers are constrained by deadlines (imposed by technology) that makes it near impossible to provide news of events that happen after its deadline. Given the high media presence in today's society a case is made in this study to take another look at the regularity hypothesis with regard to the diffusion of news events.

The regularity hypothesis states that news of significant event is transmitted more by interpersonal rather than by the mass media given the changes obtained in the media situation. Recent findings and reevaluation of studies related to news diffusion, another consideration of the regularity hypothesis is therefore required. As the present findings suggest a significant news event is spread by the electronic media more than by the print or interpersonal means of communication.

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