



Public concerns about transboundary haze: A comparison of Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia



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ABSTRACT

Public concerns about environmental problems create narrative structures that influence policy by allocating roles of blame, responsibility, and appropriate behavior. This paper presents an analysis of public concerns about transboundary haze resulting from forest fires in Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia for crises experienced in 1997, 2005 and 2013. The source of the information is content analysis of 2231 articles from representative newspapers in each country. The study shows that newspaper reporting about haze has changed from a discussion of the potential health and economic impacts of fires resulting partly naturally from El Niño-induced droughts, toward an increasing vilification of Indonesia for not ratifying the 2002 Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution; plus criticism of Singaporean and Malaysian companies investing in palm oil plantations, and ASEAN. Attention to climate change and potential biodiversity loss linked to haze, however, remains low. The paper argues that newspaper analysis of public concerns, despite political influences on the press, offers insights into how public criticism is voiced in these countries, and how perceived responsibility for action is changing.

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1. Introduction

Transboundary haze caused by forest fires in Indonesia has affected air quality in neighboring Singapore and Malaysia for a number of years. While there are records of smoke and haze occurring before the 1990s, haze was noted to be a major problem in 1997 when the cities of Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and to a lesser extent Bangkok, Brunei and Jakarta, were affected by smoke for some weeks with widespread concerns about impacts on health and economies. In 2002, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) agreed to the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (ASEAN, 2002), which sought to implement measures to prevent the forest fires leading to haze. Indonesia, however, is the only member of ASEAN not to ratify this agreement. Haze continues to be a problem, with significant crises arising in 2005 and in 2013, where successively higher records of air pollution were measured in Malaysia and Singapore.

This paper contributes to the political analysis of the haze problem by presenting a study of public concerns about haze in Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia based upon content analysis of key newspapers in each country for the crises of 1997, 2005 and 2013. By so doing, the paper serves two purposes. First, it presents a record of how public concerns have been reported, or have

changed, at eight-year intervals since the first major haze crisis, as well as since the ASEAN Agreement. Second, this analysis offers insights into how public concerns create environmental narratives or storylines, which are “devices through which actors are positioned, and through which specific ideas of ‘blame’ and ‘responsibility’ and ‘urgency’ and ‘responsible behavior’ are attributed” (Hajer, 1995, pp. 64–65). Narratives and storylines are considered an important way to understand how different societies identify the causes and likely solutions to environmental problems, with implications for different political actors such as governments and citizens (Forsyth and Walker, 2008; Roe, 1994). Consequently, by analyzing public perceptions of blame and responsibility, it is possible to identify how the political agency attributed to ASEAN, individual governments, as well as non-state actors change over time, and how far public debate (as represented by newspapers) openly targets specific actors.

To undertake this study, the paper adopts a methodology of comparative newspaper content analysis in order to indicate public concerns in each country in the different years of the survey. This methodology offers both strengths and weaknesses. On one hand, it presents a standardized comparative format over time and between different countries. Journalism is often described as “history’s first draft” and consequently forms an important reflection of, as well as influence on, public debate. Articles in newspapers also include readers’ letters and opinion pieces as well as straight news reporting. On the other hand, the countries involved also have varying levels of press censorship and control,

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and there are subtle differences in the language, reporting style, and cultural nuances in how news or public criticisms are reported in each country. This paper, however, presents this analysis as an important insight about public concerns, which can be complemented by additional information sources.

The paper starts by summarizing the haze problem in Southeast Asia. It then details the methodology used, and presents information about public concerns about blame, risk, and potential solutions, as well as the perceived connections between haze and parallel environmental debates such as climate change, biodiversity and the cultivation of palm oil. Lessons are then drawn for how each country has perceived responsibility for action about transboundary haze, and the respective roles of ASEAN agreement, national governments, and non-state actors. The paper also draws conclusions concerning the contribution of newspaper analysis for understanding public concerns.

2. The Southeast Asia haze problem

Haze occurs when smoke from forest fires and open burning combines with local air pollution over cities. Most burning has occurred on the Indonesian island of Sumatra (especially the

provinces of Riau and Jambi), and on the island of Borneo, which comprises the Indonesian province of Kalimantan and the Malaysia provinces of Sabah and Sarawak (as well as the independent state of Brunei). Smoke is carried by monsoonal winds most frequently to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia and Singapore. The first occasion when transboundary haze was identified as a major problem was between July and October 1997, and were exacerbated by unusually long droughts connected to El Niño (Eaton and Radojevic, 2001). Haze, however, has returned in years unaffected by El Niño, most seriously in 2005, 2006, and 2013 (see Fig. 1). In 2013 a new record for air pollution was set in Singapore when the local Air Pollution Index reached an all-time high of 401.

Haze is problematic for four main reasons. First, it indicates significant forest fires, with an implied risk to biodiversity and release of greenhouse gases, especially from long-burning peat fires. Second, haze presents health hazard to citizens, especially young and old. Third, haze affects economic activity and tourism. Fourth, the transboundary nature of haze threatens diplomatic relations between neighboring countries (Glover et al., 2003; Narayanan, 2002). The Pollutant Standards Index (PSI) of Singapore measures five key air pollutants: sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, ozone, carbon monoxide and PM10, which is particulate matter

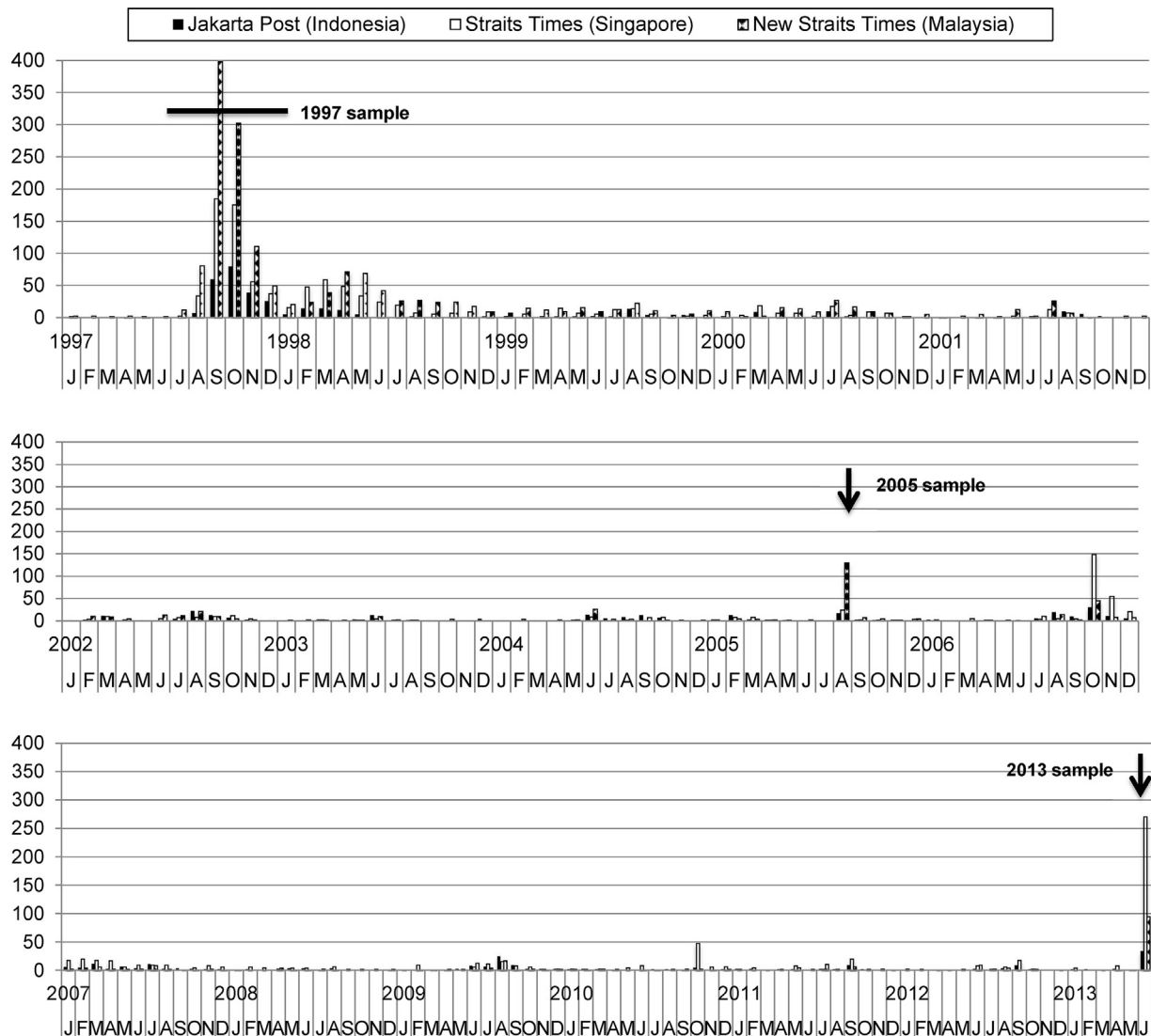


Fig. 1. Frequency of news reports about haze, July 1997–June 2013.
Source: Factiva database analysis.

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