A Comparative Analysis on the Framing of the Coverage of MH370 Crisis by the Malaysian Mainstream and Alternative Newspapers

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Abstract: The study compares the coverage of the Malaysian airline flight MH370 crisis by Malaysian mainstream and alternative newspapers – the *Star, Harian Metro, Malaysiakini and Malaysian Insider*. Considered as one of the greatest aviation crisis in the history of Malaysia by aviation experts, it presented an enormous challenge to the Malaysian authorities with regard to providing the required information. Through quantitative content analysis, the study compares the framing of the crisis by the four selected Malaysian newspapers, the sources of information and slants of the news. The study found that all the four newspapers highlighted more on responsibility frame and human interest frame, but with variations. While the mainstream newspaper; the *Star* and *Harian Metro* provided a supportive responsibility frame on the issue, the alternative newspapers *Malaysiakini* and *The Malaysian Insider* were very critical in their use of responsibility frame.

Key words: News coverage · Framing · MH370 · Crisis · Newspapers

INTRODUCTION

Crisis reporting examines approaches to the reporting of crises, including disasters and humanitarian relief. It looks at the extent to which the media report crises that threaten humankind and probes into the how and why of the crisis. Crisis may occur at individual, national, international and organisational level without any warning. During crisis, people will constantly be looking for information to facilitate immediate response to the perceived threat that the crisis poses to their lives. This requires a press system that is free in order to live up to its social responsibility role to the public, by not only updating information on the crisis, but also by interpreting the situation so that people can make sense of it. Such press must consider the possible impacts of the crisis at the national and international level and most importantly on victims and families of victims as the case may be. However, media are frequently criticized for misinformation, misleading reports and being sensational during crisis as mentioned in [1] that main emphasis in the press statements of the emergencies agencies are usually not covered by the mass media. Also, [2] pointed out that media have "sometimes fanned the flames of record by taking sides" and the distortion of

facts. These disparities may occasionally lead to double crisis which pose challenges to effective communication during the crisis.

When a Beijing bound Malaysian airlines flight MH370 mysteriously disappeared from radar one hour after take-off from Kuala Lumpur International Airport on March 8, 2014, people across the world thought that subsequent news stories on the incident will produce answers to the whereabouts of the airline. But as hour to hour coverage turned into days and weeks, so did endless waiting turn into frustration and anger among victims' families, while local and international pressures mounted on Malaysian authorities to release definite information regarding the crisis. *The New York Times* (March 11, 2014) reported that Malaysian authorities' had repeatedly asserted that they were doing their best in managing and solving the mysterious disappearance of Malaysian airline MH370, yet the report is with "scarce data and almost no precedent". Additionally, the Malaysian government also released vague, incomplete and sometimes inaccurate information, with civilian officials refuting military leaders. [3] in his studies on crisis communication during the MH370 crisis also pointed that Malaysian Airline has failed to provide sufficient and consistent information which resulted in a double crisis. Through content

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analysis, this paper will examine how the four highest circulations newspapers (in the year of 2014 when the MH370 crisis happened) – the *Star, Harian Metro, Malaysiakini and Malaysian Insider* reported the crisis. This is achieved by comparing the frames commonly used by each of them, the sources of information and the slants of the news stories.

Literature Review: Expanded from agenda-setting, framing or the second level of agenda-setting is not only telling the audience what to think, but it tells the people what and how to think about certain issues [4].

Framing is an effective way to comprehend and understand the media roles during crisis. Framing suggests that how something is presented could influence the way people think about that issue.

[5] mentioned that frame analysis enable people to interpret the reality or form their worldviews. [6] enhanced the discussion by stating that the "mass media set the frames of references that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events". Thus, frames are systems of ideas that are used to organize and construct message. Frame work as script or schema in organizing ideas or storylines that provide meanings in telling the audiences what is the problem of the crisis or in short it tells the essence of the issue. As mentioned in [7] that framing involves selection and salience, "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p.52). A successful media frame is able to make the issue become more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences. With that, it implies that media frame could be powerful in shaping the public understanding of the MH370 crisis. Audiences' attitudinal and behavioural reactions are influenced by the way news is being portrayed and framed, especially for members of MH370 victims' families who are struggling for the loss of their family members.

In framing discussion, there are five common types of frames that are employed by journalists in news reporting. [8] identified it as conflict frame, human interest frame, morality frame, economic consequence frame and responsibility frame. Semetko and Valkenburg further pointed out in their study that serious newspapers and television news programs are found to employ responsibility and conflict frames more often in news reporting, whereas sensationalist outlets will often use human interest frame in the presentation of news.

To explore media frames deeper, one should not ignore the factors that could affect the framing-building process. It is crucial to understand who have the power to control those ideas and ideologies because it could directly shape the way people perceive the world. What does it mean to the people when media attempt to legitimise certain people's right by giving those people more rights and freedom to talk and express their views, while it de-legitimise the other groups of people? It indicates that framing does carry certain ideological parameter in selecting, writing and reporting news. This is mentioned in [9] that there are several internal and external factors that could influence the frame-building process. One of the important factors is the influence of source which is ideologically bias.

In frame-setting process, source is a vital key that could influence the news frames. [10] stated that the importance of news source in framing process is building the "structural qualities of news frames". This is vital as reliable source could add credibility to the news contents. [7] argued that to some extent, the source is the story. It is because the sources of news stories can determine the content of the news articles and thereby have power to influence the angle the news is presented. A study by [11] that news sources is the one who make efforts to frame information in news stories. They further called it as frame sponsor or in other words the powerful sources, mainly media owners could intervene the framing process which often lead to the biases of the news report [12]. By adopting the similar sources in news reporting could be bias as no equal news spaces have been given to carious sites [13].

Slant is another news frame used by many researchers. [14] stated that "Slant occurs when a news report emphasizes one side's preferred in a political conflict while ignoring or derogating another side's. One-sided framing emphasizes some elements and suppresses others in ways that encourage recipients to give attention and weight to the evaluative attributes that privilege that favoured side's interpretation. This is the essence of slanted news." News slant can either be supportive or critical of a group or individual. In a study by [15], *Utusan Malaysia* appeared to be more critical than *Sin Chew Daily* in framing the Hindraf demonstration. More often, *Utusan Malaysia* projected the demonstration in a very negative way due to the contradicting objectives of the demonstration which appears to have challenged the Malay privileges. This implies that the slant of a newspaper is mostly influenced by a range of causal factors including political, economic and social context in the country.

Recent studies on framing have shifted to online media, blog and the interactive social network sites. A study by [16] aims to access whether the news media had replaced the traditional mass media as a source of the first-level agenda setting as reported in Fortune, 2015, June 1 that there is a decline in print newspapers readership. However, there are on the other hand some studies that reveal that mainstream newspapers are still able to affect the salience of issues discussed online. It is because issue discussed online is often extracted from the print newspapers [17]. During crisis, some people may rely on online newspapers for the fast information updates, whereas some may prefer mainstream newspapers that often deem to be more reliable and truthful source of information. Nevertheless, it is of great concern whether both print and electronic news could provide a clear direction to the audience so that they could act meaningfully in order to ease tension. As in the case of MH370, various arguments and discussions have been made by the authorities and public, however there are also many unanswered questions such as why the Malaysian communication system was disabled and the reason behind declaring that the flight may have ended in Andaman Sea and that the passengers are presumed dead. These questions are crucial in view of the fact that there is no conclusive evidence that points to the last location of the aircraft. Hence, newspapers play a vital role in identifying and reporting of crisis as it has priority right in selecting and deciding what to be focused and highlighted [18]. This is significant in the context of crisis coverage as readers' attitudes towards the crises are directly shaped by the way it has been framed in the first place.

Methodlogy: A content analysis approach was used to extract information from the selected mainstream and alternative newspapers. The sample (a total of 2427 news articles) was drawn from the first six months of the crisis which represents the peak of the crisis.

Sample distribution			
Date 8/3/2014 8/9/2014	Malaysiakini	Malaysian Insider	Harian Metro	Star
March	265	526	315	287
April	122	206	120	101
May	45	96	69	37
June	22	62	28	12
July	11	21	14	8
August	13	16	9	14
September	1	2	2	2
Total	491	929	552	455

Coding of the articles was done sentence by sentence to ensure that a more detail information is obtained from the newspapers articles. It looks at the types of frames, slant of news and news sources. All of the types of frames are operationalized according to the 21 questions provided by [8] to ensure systematic collection of data to certify the data's validity and reliability. To ensure the reliability of this study, two communication graduates were trained as the second and third coder. A test coding with the selection of 10-25% sample of the news articles (243 news articles) to avoid any inconsistencies and inadequacies [19]. Therefore, a ten percent which is 243 articles from all newspapers were tested. Using Holsti's formula [20], it was found that the intercoder reliability was 0.8436 which proved that the data collection is valid and reliable.

RESULT

There is a total of 6820 sentences mentioned about the types of frames in the newspapers. As shown in Table I, *Malaysiakini* (51%), *Malaysian Insider* (56.6%) and the *Star* (56.2%) had used attribution of responsibility as the most frequent frame followed by human interest frame as the second highest news frame. On the other hands, *Harian Metro* (50.8%) utilized human interest frame the most of its reporting, followed by attribution of responsibility frame.

Table II above shows a chi-square test which explores the difference in the type of news frames used by the four newspapers. The result shows p value of 0.000, which indicates that there is significant difference in the type of news frames used by each of the four newspapers.

There is a total of 15161 sentences that mentioned the news sources in the four newspapers. Among them, government sources was the most frequently quoted by *Malaysiakini* (41.2%), *Malaysian Insider* (29%), *Harian Metro* (33.9%) and the *Star* (49.3%). More often, the newspapers heavily relied on government officials such as Minister of information and the police chief among others for updates. Besides, alternative newspapers such as *Malaysiakini* and *Malaysian Insider* also relied on members of media (second highest news source) particularly the international media such as *CNN*, *Reuter* as well as media in other countries to compare the information reported in the newspapers. In contrast, mainstream newspapers such as *Harian Metro* and the *Star* relied on victims' families and friends (second highest news source) to report information regarding the victims and victims' families' background.

Table I: Types of Frames

	Malaysiakini	Malaysian Insider	Harian Metro	Star
Economic Consequence	122	179	54	64
Conflict	294	388	19	46
Attribute of Responsibility	1032	1748	267	511
Morality	143	207	54	10
Human Interest	433	564	407	278
Total	2024	3086	798	909

Table Ii: Chi-square Test for Types of Frames

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.234E2	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	532.164	12	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	29.922	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	6820		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 48.62.

Table III: News Source

	Malaysiakini	Malaysian Insider	Harian Metro	Star
Expert/Professional	121	550	346	149
International Community	676	901	339	295
Government	1768	1832	833	1034
NGO	56	57	153	68
Member of Media	760	1753	93	76
Opposition	370	285	2	32
Victim Family & Friends	148	692	492	300
Member of Public	395	243	199	143
Total	4294	6313	2457	2097

Table IV: Chi-square Test for News Source

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.490E3	21	.000
Likelihood Ratio	2761.380	21	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	19.014	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	15161		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 46.20.

Table V: Slant of News

	Malaysiakini	Malaysian Insider	Harian Metro	Star
Critical	666	603	131	70
Supportive	159	120	66	70
Total	825	723	197	140

Table VI: Chi-square Test for News Slant

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	94.976[a]	3	.000
Likelihood Ratio	83.222	3	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	58.610	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	1885		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 30.82.

Table IV above shows a chi-square test which explores the differences in news source quoted by each of the four newspapers. The result shows p value of 0.000 which indicates that there is significant difference in the news sources used by the four newspapers.

A total of 1885 sentences reported the MH370 crisis actors in either critical or supportive way. Table 5.0 reveals that alternative newspapers *Malaysiakini* (paint the government in a negative light. Most of the critical frame is related to blaming the government for being unable to handle the crisis professionally. In contrast, mainstream newspapers *Harian Metro* (33.5%) and the *Star* (50%) supported the government by projecting 80.7%) and *Malaysian Insider* (83.4%) tend to its handling of the crisis in a positive manner.

Table VI above shows a chi-square test which explores the differences in the news slants employed by each of the four newspapers. The result shows p value of 0.000, which indicates that there is significant difference in the slants used by the four newspapers.

DISCUSSION

Generally, the disappearance of the MH370 received massive media coverage from the local newspapers. It should be noted that even though all of the Malaysian newspapers provided adequate coverage to the crisis, yet the frame in which they reported the crisis differs. The results of the frame, sources and slants used shows that there are significant differences between mainstream and alternative newspapers in their coverage of the crisis.

All of the newspapers focused on both responsibility frame and human interest frame. Yet, the way alternative and mainstream newspapers reported the crisis differs from each other. In reporting the responsibility frame, alternative newspapers provided a more critical views on the issue. Keywords such as "prompt", "warn", "demand", "question" and "ask" are frequently used against the Malaysian government in the reporting of the crisis. They demanded that the Malaysian government should provide enough information regarding the flight, as well as be more responsive in handling of MH370 issue. As reported in *Malaysian Insider* (2014) that "it doesn't seem to me that the Malaysian authorities were very responsive to what was happening in their airspace. When you ask: how could this happen?, if the air traffic controllers haven't been monitoring things very closely then it would be seven hours before somebody realized it hadn't got there".

In contrast, the mainstream newspapers provided a more supportive frame by emphasizing that the authorities were trying their best to investigate the missing airline. It was found that the *Star* and *Harian Metro* attempted to frame the crisis in such a manner that appear to suggest that nobody knows how it happened, therefore nobody should bear the responsibilities. For example, *Harian Metro* reported that it is the god's predetermined destiny [original text from Bahasa Malaysia, "takdir Ilahi yang sudah ditetapkan"]. Therefore, pointing finger at this critical moment is not appropriate. This is reported in the *Star* (2014) that "even an advanced country would have great difficulty handling such an unprecedented issue". By this we mean a situation where the media deliberately selected the kind of responsibility frame it wants the readers to focus on (selective responsibility frame). This is supported by MH370 study by [21] that Malaysian newspaper, *New Straits Times* employed the ethical behavior frame, cooperation frame and the leadership frame to support the Malaysian global image and reputation. For instance, defending Malaysia's withholding of information. News media can have a critical role in shaping public opinion about who is responsible for causing the problem or crisis. In this study, it is vital that the news media is able to provide a balance responsibility frame to the audience to ensure that all sides of a story are covered. However, most of the responsibility frame were selectively chosen to support the government's handling the crisis. Additionally, *Harian Metro* emphasize more human interest frame than the *Star* in reporting the crisis. Most of the news highlights on the victim families emotion. Keywords related to the human interest frame include such words as lonely [sunyi], lonely [sepi] and Miss [rindu].

With regard to news sources, the government is the highest number of news sources mentioned in the four newspapers. Unsurprisingly, media practitioners tend to refer to official sources during the moment of crisis to avoid any bias and inaccurate information as the verified information could only be obtained from official sources. However, it could pose double crisis when conflicting information are coming from the very sources that journalists are supposed to trust. *American Broadcasting Company* (March 8, 2015) reported that most of the Malaysian news reports were lacking of details and unsure on "*what authorities were doing*". A lot of conflicting and unverified information were reported by the media. For instance, the two imposters onboard MH370 plane were originally reported as four imposters

earlier in the news media as well as the authority sources pointing to the wrong searching location which further confused the investigation team to search either in the west or north. Hence, verifying information is most important during crisis, it is vital for the official source to establish itself as a credible source of facts during the period of crisis. In the case of MH370, the conflicting information could challenge the credibility of the news.

Despite this, [22] mentioned that in news reporting, not all sources are given the equal ability to communicate their perspectives, or encode their preferred agendas. More often, the more powerful or wealthy in society enjoy some advantages as compared to the less powerful who often do not get their ideas presented through the news media. In the study of MH370 crisis, most of the information are disseminated by the government, it is equally fair to say that the authorities or the investigators will have full information as they are the one that are involved in searching for the missing airline. However, it is critical when the journalist and people do not get access to "these" information on what had happened and who is responsible for the crisis. In an interview with CNN reporter (2014, March 23), *The Malaysian Insider* chief editor Jahabar Sadiq pointed out that in reporting MH370 crisis; certain newspapers that deem to be critical such as *The Malaysian Insider* were often barred from briefing and denied entry into press conferences. In Malaysia, scholars [23, 24 , 25] have pointed out that Malaysia is not free enough to be democratic as most of the information is heavily controlled by the government. Hence, in this study, journalists had no ways to get enough access to information and as a result most of the news stories are found to be generalized with information such as the victims' background or by adopting 100% of the information from the official source without critical analysis.

On slant of the news, *Malaysiakini* and *The Malaysian Insider* provided a more critical frame compared to the *Star* and *Harian Metro*. The difference could be attributed to the level of freedom enjoyed by the online newspapers which do not require a permit to operate. For instance, both *Malaysiakini* and *The Malaysian Insider* criticized the Malaysian authorities for failure to detect the two imposters onboard MH370 flight. The newspapers further questioned the government who put the passengers at risk of the possibility of terrorist attack due to human negligence. In contrast, mainstream newspapers such as the *Star* and *Harian Metro* did not emphasize much on the security lapse issue. Although the

Star is able to provide a more balance news reports compared to *Harian Metro*, however, most of the news reports supported the government in handling the crisis.

This finding is consistent with the study by [26] found out that the traditional media fails to provide sufficient information for youth. As a result, they shifted to the alternative media for information. Apart from this, youth believe that alternative news websites present a multiple viewpoints in reporting and are often more critical by drawing a more in-depth analysis. As pointed by [27] that one of the problem is that the journalists take an easy way by merely quoting 100% on what official sources said rather than attach some justification on the issue. The adoption of official sources without any censorship implies that there is no critical viewpoint in news writing. As in the case of MH370 crisis, mainstream newspapers often framed the government in a positive light by using keywords such as "did their best", "being transparent", "professional", "working hard", "komited" (Committed), "bertungkus-rumus" (Working hard) and "bertanggungjawab" (responsible). Additionally, whenever the Malaysian government was criticized by external parties, mainstream newspapers are found to provide spaces for the authorities to clarify and explain their positions. As reported in Harian Metro that "Acting Transport Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, once again pointed out at a press conference yesterday that Malaysia did not hide any information about the disappearance of MH370" [original text: Pemangku Menteri Pengangkutan, Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, sekali lagi menegaskan pada siding media semalam bahawa Malaysia tidak menyembunyikan apa-apa maklumat mengenai kehilangan MH370]. This is supported by [28, 29, 30] that framing are imbued with certain ideological bias and that media production are shaped by the hegemonic ideologies.

The formation of reality in a society is heavily influenced by the way media define and interpret the problems in an event/issue. When media institutions are locked and trapped into the power structure, members of the are dominated by the false logic and false consciousness. While news frames are expected to fulfill the major audience frame; yet, journalists may neglect the measurement of the salience of news elements to be aligned with audience's schemata due to the controls and restrictions. This is problematic especially during the crisis period where people are struggling for basic needs and rights. Hence, the understanding of how a communicated text is framed is vital and inevitable. It is important that news frames should reflect the public needs especially the victim families who may have lost their loved ones. This process would require agreement among contending elites and citizens on which frame was most accurate, fair and complete.

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