

## **Framing the Media: Harmonious Reporting on Malaysia-Singapore Relationship**

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**Abstract.** In this paper, news framing and news agendas are used to identify whether harmonious as illustrated in the Malaysian media contributes to a symbiotic relationship between Malaysia and its neighbouring country - Singapore. The case study provides an important example of the way the media helps define regional relationships for both countries and is essential to regional stability. A textual analysis is used to analyze 497 online news of BERNAMA (Malaysia news agency) from 1996 to 2008. Most of the news articles show direct involvement of higher-ranking government officers. The agenda of the news was derived from the government's perspective, not that of the public. This concludes that the Malaysian media groups are tied to leadership styles and news reporting styles in their regional reporting. The paper also concludes with a summary of what has been discovered about development journalism practices in Malaysia and a note of its possible changing will be in the future.

### **1. Introduction**

Since decolonization in 1957, development journalism has played a central role in serving Malaysian government by disseminating ideas on issues concerning that country's national development. Indeed, development journalism is seen as the mainstream form of journalism practice in Malaysia, not only on domestic issues but also significantly, on regional and international issues. In this paper, news framing and news agendas are used to identify whether harmonious as illustrated in the Malaysian media contributes to a symbiotic relationship between Malaysia and its neighbouring country - Singapore.

### **2. Media reporting**

#### **2.1 Harmonious**

'Harmonious', in this paper, describes news values which work to achieve public agreement or public consensus through routine news reporting. In other words, 'harmonious' is marked by a striving for public agreement in feelings, attitudes, or actions".

The concept of harmonious reporting in this research emerges in the form of different approaches that influence readers through the media's influence. Harmonious reporting is persuasive reporting. News is - within the context of development journalism - a powerful tool but it needs to be framed

according to the needs of the society. Persuasive news is workable if the news impacts on its readers' beliefs and attitudes. However, the acceptability and implementations of this approach need to be considered to ensure a strong relationship between the government and the media regardless of domestic, regional or international conflicts.

Asian values in the style of reporting in Asian countries is seen as 'harmony' where it can be conceptualized as an "Asian news work norm as reporting that is free of provocative and inflammatory words, phrases, and information" [1]. They claim that editorial approaches to the news were influenced by the "non-confrontational" frames of reporting and did not aggressively highlight this politically sensitive issue, an aspect of reportage that is important to Western journalism. Asian journalism is opposed to this style of reporting by Western journalists.

However, this contradiction has imposed a significant style of writing, which is known as 'harmonious reporting' which generally refers to how far does the news reporting accept not only the cultures that racial groups share but also to ensuring peaceful living in Malaysia. Racial harmony is fundamental to a country's unity. It is important that different communities in Malaysia or any other country learn to live in harmony together so that they can prosper. Racial harmony has been the distinguishing trait of Malaysian society since the independence.

Media organizations in Asia share the same standard of news reporting which is inculcated with Asian values, i.e. harmonious and supportive reporting [2]. It is a reporting style that "avoids emphasizing conflict and shows respect for national leaders and authority". It also focuses on leaders' expectations of what can be resolved during conflicts and confrontations. Based on this, the concept of "harmony" in this study emphasizes the style (techniques) of writing, implies the expectation on the impact of news articles. It seems that the Asian style of reporting, such as harmonious reporting, is the most realistic way to mute conflicts, particularly since the concept of harmony in Malaysia media rests on maintaining social stability. Shakila [3] asserts that:

...driven by the notion of "development journalism", the press was to promote positive news about government policies and projects and discourage what was deemed unnecessary political bickering and criticisms from the opposition which might jeopardize "national interest". This nationalist ideology of promoting economic development, solidarity between the country's many ethnic and cultural groups and, consequently, national stability that was, and still is, being promoted by the mainstream media is instrumental in shaping and popularizing the politics of consensus among the *rakyat* (citizens) as well as the media practitioners.

Harmonious reporting aims to reduce tension and ignore hidden agendas or expectations from both sides. Harmonious reporting as one element in development journalism practices is demonstrated by the of selected news articles. As argued by Nasution [4] that "harmony can be conceptualized as an Asian news work norm as reporting that is free of provocative and inflammatory words, phrases, and information. It is reporting that avoids emphasizing conflict and shows respect for national leaders and authority".

Massey and Chang [5] view harmony as "a key Asian value that ought to be conveyed through Asian journalism". However, this kind of reporting could be influenced by other factors, such as the nature of media organizations, and influenced by politicians and other powerful individuals.

The former prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamed, and that of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, have been acknowledged as strong advocates of the premise that "the modern, economically strong Asian society is best built on a foundation of traditional Eastern beliefs, not transplanted Western values" [6]. This principle has been supported by some respondents who think that both leaders rejected the Western free press and believe that the standard of their media reporting included

Asian beliefs as required. The leaders of Malaysia and Singapore argue that these news reporting and media practices serve their countries the best. It was asserted that:

Singapore and Malaysia occupy a central position in the debate on Asian values and Asian journalism. This is partly due to prominent stands taken by their former prime ministers, Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamed respectively. Both have presided over media systems that are profitably run on a commercial basis, but which are closely supervised by the government, and do not function as independent checks on power. Far from being coy about the absence of a free-wheeling press in their countries, they have argued that their media systems represent a workable alternative to the Western model, and are better suited to their societies [7].

Asian values, however, overshadow news reporting in that there is an absence of conflict and by being more supportive of the values of nation building. This value has been articulated through how the news is reported. It may suggest applicable cultural values to other Asian societies as a workable alternative to a liberal free press. Are there any Asian values in Asian journalism? If yes, what are these values? Asian values may be related to the cultural practice of managing sensitive issues in multi-racial societies. Asian cultures are 'polite' as people are brought up with so many dos and don'ts, beliefs, customs, religions and races [8, 9]. For example, in most Asian countries the term 'polite' refers to using a form of words which is inappropriate or rude for example, calling parents with the first name. Asians normally address their parents as Ma/Ibu/Amma for mother and Abah/Papa/Appa/Ba for father. Another example concerns Asians respecting their elders through their actions. In Malaysia, it is rude to walk right in front of the elders without bowing first to show respect for them.

Therefore, reporters' style of writing is descriptive and less straight forward since they attempt to write within the culturally accepted boundaries, without provoking any controversy. However, sometimes politeness is not workable in certain cultures.

Harmonious concept identified by exploring how, why and when journalists/reporters who follow the development journalism philosophy appear to take a harmony-oriented approach towards framing international relations.

## **2.2 Asian Journalism**

We argue that the significance of harmony and conciliatory factors are the major elements that construct the framework concerning the news reports on Malaysia and Singapore issues. However, a study on Asian journalism found that "being Asian does not automatically enable Asian journalists and media to present news about Asia in a way significantly different from their Western counterpart" [10]. In Malaysia, depending on what is being reported, press freedom is negotiated to support 'harmony' in reporting. Harmonious reporting is embedded in Asian journalism and linked to the concept of press freedom with responsibility. Loh and Mustafa Kamal in [11] claimed that "the Western style of journalism is discouraged as it is deemed to be contrary to Malaysian values. In fact, Western journalism is seen to abuse their right to freedom of expression and this, in turn, shows Malaysians that the controls in Malaysia are not out of place".

However, "journalism in Asia is influenced more by Western, or universal, news work norms than by Asian values" [12]. Similarly, Wong [13] argues that the approaches in Malaysia and Singapore are no less viable than those of the Western liberal press due to their compatibility with Asian cultures' postcolonial histories. By investigating press freedom, development journalism practices and the prevailing 'harmony', 'maintaining social stability' and 'bias elements' in news reporting, media are still bound by government restrictions [14, 15]. It was also highlighted on how the non-adversarial role of media in supporting the government through news reporting.

With the rise of the Internet, the adversarial role of media has been challenged by an avalanche of alternative media platforms such as blogs and websites. The issues of media ownership have become significant to this new type of media. Being too free does not provide better solutions either. For example, the Internet might encourage people to dishonour or insult particular individuals. Schult is alarmed at the impact that the Internet is having on social discourse:

... at a time when the scale of the news media has never been vaster, its reach greater and its timing quicker, control is no longer be held so tightly... In ruminations about the global media industry, the complexity of contemporary political and public life, and the alarming concentration of media ownership, it is easy to lose sight of the reality that the media is at its most influential when it is local. The global media may swamp us with homogenized stars, heroes, villains, disasters and crises that provide a rapidly changing backdrop for more prosaic, yet no less urgent, reality of our lives. At the level of the city, state or nation the best of the news media is able to explain us to ourselves, highlight our shortcomings and provide the insights that enable new solutions to emerge [16].

### 2.3 Framing

The roles of journalists and editors are considered important in framing the news as they decide what is relevant and what should be reported. Framing in communication or media can be referring to “the words, images, phrases, and presentation styles that a speaker (e.g., a politician, a media outlet) uses when relaying information about an issue or event to an audience” [17].

The concept of ‘framing’ is significant to a study aiming to identify the importance of the news agenda setting, and what can be seen as ‘harmonious’ reporting, as the main or primary characteristic of Malaysian news reporting. How the media frame the issues through the headlines and the news text is important. How news coverage can actually provide an independent perspective on and have a watchdog role over government, and will be investigated. The relevance of this study is that we emphasize the news frame and the news agenda setting not only for their impact on journalists’ routines, but also on what journalists have termed ‘the Malaysia-Singapore relationship’.

What can be called ‘responsible’ reporting by the media is demonstrated through an analysis of the news agenda and news frames regarding Singapore-linked issues. For example, this study provides the news trend analysis that reflects which agenda was highlighted the most. According to DeFleur, agenda setting theory is about:

... [a] process of selecting media content and then designing an agenda format for its presentation to audiences has been studied within somewhat distinct issues, or frameworks. One framework—the original and most studied—is the relationship among (1) the organization (agenda) of the overall news report, (2) audience beliefs about the relative importance of the issues encountered in those reports, and (3) how those audience beliefs about relative importance influence the political process (the so-called policy agenda). That is, the agenda set by the news media is said to be a major influence on the beliefs of the audience about the hierarchy of importance of the issues and topics reported by the press. In turn, those issues that come to be regarded as important by the public become the agenda of concerns of policy makers. These may be government officials (e.g., political candidates, elected legislators, and judges) or others who have a voice in influencing policy directions (e.g., clergy, spokespersons for social movements, and educators). Thus, the agenda setting process within this framework is a significant part of the political process [18].

The news agenda set by the media on the Malaysia-Singapore relationship is perceived to be important because it shapes the character of regional stability.

Consequently, the Malaysian government needs to shape BERNAMA media strategies so that it maintains regional stability. Three main factors shape the case study: How has the agenda been set through specific news and issues highlighted especially in the mainstream media like BERNAMA? It is important to understand how BERNAMA frames the issues on the relationship and to what extent the news has been perceived as an important element that contributes to the harmonious relations of both countries. In other words, the relationship has been portrayed as 'endurance' on the surface by the media, despite the underlying tensions building up through the years. In fact, the news headlines generated by BERNAMA have given different perspectives of the water issue.

### 3. Methodology

The unit of analysis for this study is the online news produced by BERNAMA (Berita Nasional Malaysia), the state-owned news agency which is also a government instrument. It asserts that among other factors operating to consolidate the pro-government orientation, is the heavy reliance on BERNAMA for material used in news bulletins [19]. Despite issues of ownership and economic competition, the media has been viewed as a major contributor to the Malaysia-Singapore relationship [20].

BERNAMA's role in facilitating the regional relationship is demonstrated through textual analysis. This analysis indicates the representations from Malaysia's willingness or reluctance in resolving the issues pertaining to Malaysia-Singapore relationship. The analysis specifies the Malaysian government's perspectives on any issues with Singapore. Simultaneously, the issues concerning the Malaysia-Singapore relationship which have been framed by BERNAMA could demonstrate the government's approach and how it deals with Singapore-related issues.

#### 3.1 Measures

An analysis of 497 BERNAMA news online documents from 1996 to 2008 is included, to investigate how BERNAMA demonstrates and frames the elements of 'harmonious reporting'. Diplomatic agenda setting by government is also analyzed since it has an impact on reportage, specifically Malaysia-Singapore issues. The comparative analysis of the news reports reveals a trend towards reviewing this important relationship with Singapore, whatever the specific issue being discussed.

News headlines and reports from BERNAMA are analyzed through a textual analysis to identify how the development journalism model works towards framing international relations.

Our focus is what a study of BERNAMA online news reveals: whether it contains the harmonious reporting elements or otherwise, and how it is perceived by media and policy experts. From this study, harmonious reporting can be seen in the news trend of BERNAMA news and this is further proven in the textual analysis which will be discussed later in this thesis. Apart from BERNAMA's roles as a news agency, it carries out other roles to meet its main objective of reporting the news. These other roles, as stated in the BERNAMA Act 1967 are: firstly, delivering the news to the people when it comes to regional relationships; and secondly, cultivating the spirit of nationalism. These two are mutually exclusive as both contribute to the understanding of a press which delivers the good and bad of news values.

Textual analysis has been used to develop beyond the quantitative analysis to interpret meanings qualitatively, taking random samples of news articles on the Malaysia-Singapore relationship. Textual analysis is used to analyze latent content and "to interpret or 'read' the hidden or implied meanings of a message" [21]. It is used to analyze meanings (implicit or explicit) of state ideologies, especially on the question of how Malaysia perceives its relationship with Singapore and how they

handle or manage it through media reporting. Textual analysis also helps to create a richer understanding of the function and value of any single text in the news. This method attempts to understand how meanings from the news move from the author/journalists to the audience and analyze how the text is related to other variables (leadership, harmonious and conciliatory elements) that precede it. The main objectives of conducting textual analysis are:

- a) to see is there harmonious reporting in the news.
- b) to analyze leadership styles influence the news writing.
- c) do the headlines, first and second paragraph constitutes any meaning of harmonious reporting.

#### 4. Findings and Analysis

In identifying the harmonious pattern of news coverage of the news in the Malaysia and Singapore relationship it is best to use the textual analysis method. The approach is to see the elements of positive and negative in the text. Therefore, analysing the most important topics highlighted by the media concerning this relationship will identify the harmonious news structure. Regional news covers all the events that occur between Malaysia and Singapore based on the Malaysian media reporting channelled through its national news agency, BERNAMA.

Malaysia's relationship with Singapore as represented in news reports is used as a case study in order to see how BERNAMA responds to the issues and to what extent media reporting affects the regional relationship. This is done by analysing Malaysian BERNAMA online news reporting, which contributes to the harmonious reporting style in the country. The theme highlighted by BERNAMA is the overall relationship with Singapore and how both countries react to and manage conflicts.

There are two possible motives that invite the mainstream media like BERNAMA to contribute as negotiators through its coverage. First, BERNAMA is a government media agency and the government uses news reports to define the relationship between both countries. Second, the Malaysian government has voiced its concerns over Singapore's actions to increase public interest in issues of national interest which reflect the communal structure of Malaysian society. It is undeniable that other mainstream media newspapers like *Berita Harian (BH)* and the *News Straits Times (NST)* report issues on Singapore which are highly influenced by their owners. Several of the newspapers are owned by political parties which wield great influence over the appointment of the senior editors [23].

The findings suggest that the news reporting by BERNAMA and the government officials (as the sources) significantly play the same role as 'agents of harmony' despite their statements in the news reporting. The message embedded in the news articles describes the repetition of how important the issues and conflicts are to both countries. The news articles also depict to what extent both countries can take the pressure off each other by using mainstream and authoritative news sources as the medium of discussions. BERNAMA is under an obligation to report any regional news, while maintaining its role as a media representative of the government.

Development journalism might be prominent in internal reporting but not necessarily the same practice is applied in international or regional reporting. Findings show that:

- a) there are leaders influence in the news reporting;
- b) less harmonious based on leadership styles. Despite Abdullah calm characters, it was found that during his administration BERNAMA was more aggressive in their writing as compared to Mahathir;
- c) the attribution of responsibility (expectations and consequences) was clear and straight forward in the news headlines.

However, the findings demonstrate that the news articles by BERNAMA on the Malaysia-Singapore relationship or related issues are less harmonious in their reporting when

different leaders are in power. Therefore, BERNAMA shows in their reporting as less harmonious reporting towards the country counterparts but totally supported the government actions. It also demonstrates evidence of less harmonious reporting in the news based on leaders (prime minister). Most of the news articles provide few details on real issues concerning the relationship. The media are not open especially when highlighting discrepancies on the Malaysian side.

## 5. Summary

Referring to the relationship between Malaysia and Singapore, news has its own values and agendas, be it transparent or hidden. BERNAMA online is seen as a persuasive mechanism in Malaysian society. The construction of news reflects the reality of the social system and often helps the public to understand better what has been described to them. The interpretation of news in the case study of Malaysia and Singapore may conclude that development journalism is used in any kind of news as a persuasive method by the government or as a textual strategy. However the definition of news is more than just describing the reality in the social system by making them 'comprehensible and interesting' [22].

Textual analysis significantly illuminates how the mainstream media like BERNAMA can help to develop a better understanding of the regional relationship and its future. Most of the news articles show direct involvement of higher-ranking government officers. Therefore the agenda of the news was derived from the government's perspective, not that of the public. This study concludes that the Malaysian media groups are tied to leadership styles and news reporting styles in their regional reporting.

The overall findings for content analysis show that there is element of influence by different leaders in the news and which issues is most significant in the relationship throughout 13 years. Meanwhile, textual analysis demonstrate that there are 'less harmonious' elements embedded in the news articles according to issues and based on different leadership styles. The findings have demonstrated that certain values are integrated in Asian journalism practices regardless of the issues that are raised by the media. These results also suggest that weaknesses in the news reporting especially those involving development journalism practices could be countered with a different style of news reporting and media practices so that they are in effect more accountable to the public.

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