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Framing inter-religious dispute: a comparative analysis of Chinese-, English-, and Malay-language newspapers in Peninsular Malaysia

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Religious and ethnicity issues in multicultural societies have always been difficult to report. This study aims to conduct a framing analysis of the coverage of the biggest inter-religious dispute in Malaysia to date – the “Allah” dispute. Specifically, the study compares the coverage of Chinese-, English-, and Malay-language newspapers and assesses the factors that lead to differences in frame building. The findings showed that these newspapers reported the dispute with different degrees of intensity and prominence, and they employed different news sources. Although conflict appeared to be the salient frame used by the dailies, the aspects highlighted by them varied. Sin Chew (Chinese-language daily) was the most vocal in its coverage, which reflected a counter-hegemonic discourse. The Star (English-language daily) used a moderate approach, while Utusan (Malay-language daily) strongly supported the status quo. The frames built by The Star and Utusan could be attributed to the fact that these two newspapers were inclined to serve the politically vested interests of their owners.

Keywords: framing; inter-religious conflict; vernacular newspaper; Allah dispute

Introduction

In January 2009, the Home Ministry of Malaysia approved a publishing permit for The Herald (a Catholic weekly newspaper) on the condition that it would not use the word “Allah”. Subsequently, the chief bishop of the Kuala Lumpur Roman Catholic Church, Murphy Pakiam, who was the publisher of the newspaper, filed for a judicial review of the Home Ministry’s ruling, claiming that the Home Minister had acted beyond his powers, and the term “Allah” was not exclusive to Islam.

In December 2009, the High Court ruled that The Herald had the right to use the word “Allah”, but the decision caused a stir in the country. The Muslims feared that the sanctity of Islam, the country’s official religion, would be tarnished and that this use of the word “Allah” would lead Muslims to become Christians. The controversy developed into vandalism and a series of attacks on places of worship, including churches, mosques, and Sikh temples across the country. The Metro Tabernacle Church in Desa Melawati suffered the most severe damage, which was estimated to cost between RM1.5 million and RM2 million. In addition, Molotov cocktails were thrown at some Catholic convent schools in the country.

After a successful application by the home minister, the High Court’s decision was stayed. The matter then was heard by the Court of Appeal, which eventually over-ruled the landmark decision by the High Court in October 2013. Nonetheless, the prime minister of Malaysia, Najib Abdul Razak, said that the court’s decision was only applicable

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to *The Herald* and that Malaysian Christians could still use the word “Allah” in church. This, however, did not help to resolve the polemical debate. In fact, the argument between Muslims and non-Muslims continues today, and it will likely be a long-term issue faced by all Malaysians. Indeed, the “Allah” dispute is the biggest inter-religious conflict in Malaysia to date. More importantly, it has marked the beginning of a long-term conflict between the Muslims and non-Muslims, and it has had a great effect on inter-religious relations and politics in the country.

**Objectives, research questions and significance of the study**

This study aims to examine the framing of the “Allah” dispute by Chinese-, English-, and Malay-language newspapers in Malaysia. The daily newspapers chosen for this study are *Sin Chew Daily* (Chinese), *The Star* (English), and *Utusan Malaysia* (Bahasa Malaysia). Although these three mainstream dailies have national circulations, they are predominantly read within Peninsular or West Malaysia (Selva, 2014). The rationale for the selection of these three newspapers will be explained in detail in the section on the methodology used in this study.

Specifically, the study asks the following questions. What was the degree of intensity of the newspapers’ coverage of the “Allah” dispute? What were the news sources used by the newspapers? What were the news frames employed by the newspapers? What were the valences of the news articles? In addition, this study aims to assess the factors that affected the newspapers in their framing of the “Allah” dispute.

Religion, ethnicity, and related issues have always been difficult areas to report in multicultural societies. Stories on religion are routinely judged and framed by the media, albeit inadvertently, to misrepresent and disrespect the essence of the beliefs of the adherents of different faiths. Furthermore, stories on religion can provide the fuel for prolonged conflicts – even violence – in societies that are historically divided by tribal and cultural rivalries (Mustafa, 2010). This article will contribute to the framing literature by discussing the process of frame-building by vernacular newspapers in the multi-ethnic country of Malaysia, where religion, politics, and media are intertwined in many powerful and profound ways.

Shoemaker (cited in Barzilai-Nahon, 2008) documented a hierarchy of five influences that shape media content: individuals; routines; organizations; institutions; and social systems. This study aims to focus on the institutional level, mainly the exogenous characteristics of organizations and their representatives that affect the news coverage (e.g., market forces and political alliances).

**Background of the study**

According to the census of 2014, Malaysia’s population is 30.2 million and comprises a multi-ethnic citizenry: Malays/indigenous groups (68.2%); Chinese (24.6%); Indians (6.4%); and others (0.8%). Although Malays are predominantly Muslim, other religions embraced by the people are Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%), and Hinduism (6.3%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2014).

The official religion of Malaysia is Islam, which has become a major symbol of Malayness in which faith is inseparable from the Malay ethno-cultural heritage (Syed Husin, 2008). The Constitution defines Malays as persons who profess the religion of Islam, habitually speak the Malay language, and conform to Malay custom. Gatsiouinis (2006) commented that Islam became the defining element of the Malay identity after other
Malaysians adopted some aspects of the Malay culture, such as food, dress, and language. Nah (2006) further remarked that one “can effectively become ‘Malay’ by embracing Islam [287]” and thus benefit from the affirmative action policies aimed at this segment of the population. The division between Malays and non-Malays is widened by the religious divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, thus creating a distinct and acute awareness of the “Other”. This has resulted in the aggravation of the inter-ethnic fracture in Malaysian society (Kahn, 2005; Ong, 2007).

In addition, Kua (2010) noted that racism has been part of Malaysian political, economic, social, and cultural realities since colonial times. Today, race has been so deeply institutionalized that it is a key factor in determining who benefits from governmental development policies, bids for business contracts, receives discounts for purchasing houses, and enters educational institutions. Race is also a factor in education policy, social policy, cultural policy, and other official policies. Kua (2010) criticized the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), or the National Front, for being still dominated by racially defined component parties, such as the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). These parties compete for electoral support from their respective racial constituencies by pandering to racial interests. Moreover, some opportunistic opposition parties similarly pander to their constituencies by using racist propaganda to win electoral support. This practice has also contributed to the vicious circle of racial politics that has characterized Malaysian politics for decades.

**Literature review**

**Vernacular newspapers in Malaysia**

Vernacular newspapers are those that are published in the native language of a particular ethnic group. They usually are aimed at and read by the members of a particular ethnic community. Because of the nation’s multi-ethnic and multilingual population, newspapers in Malaysia are published in different languages to serve the major ethnic groups. There are currently 48 newspapers in Malaysia, 14 of which are published in English, 8 in Bahasa Malaysia, 18 in Chinese, and 6 in Tamil. An important characteristic of these vernacular newspapers is their tendency to champion the interests of their respective communities (Chang, Farisah, Ruziah, & Kho, 2011; Lent, 1990; Mustafa, 2010). Although they concentrate on events that are important to the members of their ethnic group, the vernacular newspapers take different approaches to problems because different ethnic groups in Malaysia are often perceived to have different living standards and economic status (Ooi, 2006). Nonetheless, a review of the relevant literature revealed that previous studies focused mainly on the history, background, and development of the major newspapers in West Malaysia, although these dailies also reach readers in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). The review also showed that research on the evolution and development of newspapers in East Malaysia is indeed scarce. Although it is not within the scope of this study, it is noteworthy that some scholars argued that West Malaysians have little knowledge about East Malaysia, and there is an emotional disconnectedness between the two regions (David & Dealwis, 2008; Smith, 2003).

The history of vernacular newspapers in Malaysia can be traced to their roots in the colonial era. According to Halimahton, Ngu, and Raman (2006), the development of the newspaper industry in Malaya can be summarized in two phases. In the first phase (1806 to the late 1930s), British traders and colonial officials pioneered the printing of
English newspapers to satisfy the commercial needs of the British and the Europeans in the colony. A large part of the contents of these newspapers consisted of commercial news and advertisements. In contrast, the content of the Chinese and Indian newspapers reflected the cultural, emotional, and political attachments of the ethnic groups in Malaya to their homelands. The Malay newspapers also mirrored the concerns of the community at that time – religion and then Malay nationalism. The second phase (1940s to independence in 1957) witnessed a shift in the Chinese and Indian newspapers. When both ethnic groups realized that they were going to make Malaya their home, the newspapers, especially the Indian newspapers, encouraged their readers to become citizens of Malaya. In this period, newspapers strengthened the identification with their own ethnic communities. The Malays, overwhelmed by the influx of Indian and Chinese immigrants and realizing that they could lose their control of the political and economic affairs of the country, began to demonstrate these fears through the expression of anti-Chinese and anti-Indian sentiments in their newspapers. The non-Malays became more critical, especially against the pro-Malay attitude of the British administration. The fight for factional interests was prominent in the newspapers at that time.

There is a saying that there will be Chinese wherever the sea flows. As early as 1974, Lent documented that the overseas Chinese throughout Asia have understood the value of the mass media for their commercial and political gain. This is supported by the fact that overseas Chinese were second only to the Japanese in the newspaper diffusion rate at that time. Lent (1974) also observed that the influence of the Chinese press in Malaysia was surpassed only by its presence in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

The early Chinese newspapers in Malaya were partisan and sympathetic to the Chinese Revolution in China, or they focused on business in Malaya (Syed Arabi, 1989). After independence in 1957, readers looked to the Chinese press to defend and maintain their interests, which was necessary in pluralistic Malaysia where the Chinese community was often treated as a “whipping boy [5]” (Lent, 1974). In addition, Ou (2009) asserted that a symbiosis exists between the Chinese press and the Chinese community in Southeast Asia. The Chinese press, Chinese schools, and Chinese associations and guilds form a triangle that supports the Chinese community. Chinese newspapers have a unique mission as well as a belief system. They represent the cultural expression of the community, and they articulate and even shape the aspirations of the community that they serve.

In Malaysia, the Chinese community has emphasized education because they believe that “the poor should not be denied an education”. The Malaysian community strived hard to establish its present Chinese school system, which is one of the most comprehensive Chinese education systems outside the Greater Chinese region and among the Chinese community in South-east Asia (Kua, 2002). Because they understand such concerns, Chinese newspapers in Malaysia establish programs to assist the poor in continuing their studies, and they hold annual fund-raising programs that donate to Chinese primary and independent schools throughout the country.

Because the Malaysian government’s language policy emphasizes the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, fewer young people learn Chinese; thus, many believe that the Chinese newspapers are doomed. However, an interesting and contrasting finding by Lent (1974) is that many Chinese are bi- and multilingual, and hence keep the market alive for Chinese newspapers. Significantly, Ou (2009) further explained that the Chinese newspapers in Malaysia defend Chinese education, language, and culture not because of racism or chauvinism, but because Malaysia was established on the foundation of multi-ethnic and multiculturalism. Given this privileged position, it is believed that the country could enrich its culture and become more competitive and economically vibrant. In addition, Brown
(2005) found that the Chinese-language newspapers in Malaysia are relatively independent compared to their English- and Malay-language counterparts. This is because most of the Chinese press is owned by the business and media tycoon Tiong Hiew King. The English and Malay newspapers are owned by the Barisan Nasional (BN) or the National Front.

The prime minister of Malaysia, Najib Abdul Razak, proposed three roles for the Chinese media during his opening speech to the 43rd International Convention of the World Chinese Language Press Institute. He called on the Chinese media to engage in the following roles: (i) promoter of moderation; (ii) watch tower for change; and (iii) catalyst for development. In addressing the first role, Najib pointed out that the problem of extremism is not between the various religions but between the moderates and the extremists. In this regard, he highlighted that the media have a significant role to play in the quest for moderation because a more rational, secure, and equitable world could be built with collective determination. Najib also expressed the opinion that the media should function as a watchtower for change. He said the media could hold to account governments, companies, communities, and individuals by keeping watch in a steady and resolute manner. Regarding the role of the media as the catalyst of development, Najib asserted that news stories must communicate clearly and accurately the importance of government-initiated economic and social programs in improving citizens’ lives. The news needs to explain how individuals and families would be affected by the programs, why they are being implemented, and how the entire society could benefit from them (Sin Chew Daily, 21 December 2010).

Analyses of media coverage of inter-religious conflicts and inter-ethnic relations

The media coverage of inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts has been studied under the umbrella of agenda-setting, framing, or war/peace journalism. Scholars have often asserted that the issue of media coverage is tied to the ideological warfare between the powerful and the less powerful in societies. In addition, when there was a crisis in ethnic tensions among groups that perceived their oppression by the larger society, the media frames that reported these stories were skewed by biases and stereotyping (Arnold & Schneider, 2007; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007).

In their analysis of the newspaper coverage of inter-ethnic conflicts in the US, Shah and Thornton (2009) examined themes such as fear, causes of conflict, racism, violence, invasion, pathology, discontent, cooperation, and pluralism. They found that whenever there was any news coverage of one or more ethnic groups, it was always conflict related and attributable to the common frame used by reporters to explain inter-ethnic relationships in America. They also found three main patterns that emerged in the news coverage of inter-ethnic conflicts, namely the definition of problems and their solutions, the characterization of heroes and villains, and the debate over “American-ness”. Their findings indicated that the ethnic press tended to blame problems on institutional and structural causes, whereas other newspapers regarded minorities as unAmerican.

Spratt, Bullock, and Baldasty (2007) examined the coverage by four US newspapers of the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, which was a key event in sparking the civil rights movement in the country. They found that the newspapers varied in the intensity of coverage, the use of sources, and the attention to crime news. Consequently, the newspapers framed the story differently. It was found that the ethnic newspapers that targeted African-Americans defended Till’s reputation, focused on larger issues of civil rights, and provided a clear argument for social reform. In contrast, the mainstream dailies defined the case primarily as one in which the victim invited his own death, and they provided little or no support for reform.
In addition, Seow and Maslog (2005) examined the extent to which four Asian regional conflicts involving India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Philippines were framed as war journalism or peace journalism based on Johan Galtung’s classification. Overall, the news coverage of these conflicts was dominated by the frame of war journalism. Pamplona (2010) also drew on the war/peace journalism approaches to examine the coverage of conflict in Philippine newspapers. The author claimed that in the Philippines, ethnic conflicts do not stand a chance of being reported thoroughly, sensitively, or fairly by the mainstream media, which supported the ethnic dispossession in this country. The author also found that conflict reporting was more pervasive in the general news than in opinion pieces.

Anis (2006) examined how Indonesian local and national newspapers framed inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict in Poso City. The findings indicated that the local newspapers tended to be more provocative than their counterparts elsewhere in the country and the national newspapers. In addition, the local newspapers were better in providing information from first-hand sources. They interviewed refugees, suspects, perpetrators, and other people who were involved in the conflict. Nevertheless, it was found that the national newspapers had more stories on positive resolution efforts compared to the local newspapers.

Halimahton, Ngu, and Raman (2006) analyzed the treatment of race and religion-related controversial issues in various language newspapers in Malaysia. The authors studied two controversies – the M. Moorthy case and the Nyonya Tahir case. The former caused a stir when there was a tussle between Moorthy’s Indian/Hindu family and the Federal Territory Islamic Affairs Council, which argued that when Moorthy was alive he had converted to Islam without his family’s knowledge. The latter case involved a Malay/Muslim woman who, while alive, had denounced Islam, lived as a Chinese, and practiced Buddhism. The study found that the newspapers gave extensive coverage to news events deemed important to their respective communities. The Moorthy case was given the most coverage by the Tamil newspaper, while the Nyonya Tahir case was reported the most extensively by the Chinese newspaper. Similarly, because the two cases involved the Syariah Court as well as Islamic issues, the Malay newspaper gave prominent coverage to both. The English daily, which catered to all racial groups, but particularly the educated and English-speaking masses, also gave substantial coverage to both cases.

Halimahton, Ngu, and Raman (2006) observed that the media in Malaysia constantly tread on precarious ground, and they have to balance between what to write and how to write it with regard to reporting racial and religious issues. Much of the concern over the reporting of sensitive issues stemmed from the belief that a wrong move may have dire consequences. In addition, they stated that reporting sensitive issues also raised the concern about fair reporting. Journalists are responsible for emphasizing fairness and balance in news coverage of conflicts. Nevertheless, it was acknowledged that the reporting of any type of news is not value free. Instead, reports are written in the context of the values of the reporters, their superiors, the norms of the work setting, the goals and resources of the media organization, and the position of the organization within the society. The authors stated that media practitioners in Malaysia were always mindful of the sensitivities in the multi-ethnic society because they constantly bore in mind or were even fearful of the bitter racial feud in the 13 May incident (the worst racial riot in Malaysia’s history). It was claimed that after the 13 May incident, the media always erred on the side of caution instead of testing the tolerance levels of different races. The authors emphasized that this practice was especially apparent in the coverage of the Kampong Medan clashes in 2001,
in which the Malaysian media generally acted with decorum and did not exploit the racial conflict.

In his study on the role of mass media in the development of multicultural stability in the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN), Lent (1990) recognized that the structures and functions of mass media in ASEAN were very closely tied to the multilingual and multi-ethnic natures of these countries (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand). In all six countries, more than one language was used by the mass media, although in each case preference was given to the national language used to promote national identity and unity. According to Lent (1990), the ASEAN governments have promoted to varying degrees the concepts of national identity and national consciousness while preserving social and cultural harmony in multi-ethnic settings. Because of the pluralistic characteristics of the ASEAN, special reportorial techniques are used by the media to take into account ethnic sensitivities. Furthermore, he singled out Malaysia as the South-east Asian nation that has been the most active in reorienting the media to function in a pluralistic society. In this regard, mass media were used to encourage ethnic groups to respect other cultures and to play down issues that touched on communal sensitivities. Similarly, Mohd Yusof (2003) documented that in the 1960s and 1970s, the newspapers in Malaysia subscribed to the philosophy of development journalism, which views the role of newspapers as supporting national interests and promoting development, national unity, and political stability.

Khattab (2006) pointed out that since 1963, Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) has functioned as a state mouthpiece and has often perpetuated the deep differences between ethnic groups. The author argued that under the dominance of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), RTM tended to reflect Malay culture in hegemonic and monolithic terms, and it failed to represent diverse differences within and between various ethnic and indigenous groups in Malaysia. She also criticized that counter-hegemonic information was blanked out in the Malaysian media and that minorities had been absent and underrepresented for a long time. In addition, Nadarajah found that the minorities were under-represented in Malaysia in general:

The official construct of Malaysia as consisting of the “ethnic trinity,” i.e. Malay, Chinese and Indian, is a gross misrepresentation of the ethnic reality in Malaysia. There are over 80 ethnic communities in Malaysia, including hybrid ones. (Nadarajah, 2004, p. 4)

Most previous studies that investigated the coverage of inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts did not compare the frame building processes used by different vernacular newspapers. The present study considers the unique characteristics of vernacular newspapers and political situations in Malaysia. The authors believe that a framing analysis of the coverage by Malaysian newspapers of inter-religious disputes is required to contribute to the understanding of the inter-connectedness of religion, race, political forces, power relations, and the ideology of the media.

Theoretical framework
Tuchman and Gitlin were two of the earliest scholars to introduce framing to media studies in 1978 and 1980 respectively (Zhou, 2008). They used the concept of framing as a tool to understand news as a social construction and a social resource. Framing differs significantly from the repetition- and accessibility-based models in agenda setting and priming (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). According to Entman, the purpose of framing is
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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. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

Tankard (2008) enumerated several news features that commonly convey frames, including headlines and kickers, subheads, photographs, photo captions, and leads. Wong (2004) outlined four major dimensions of framing that could be studied: (i) presentation of news items (their size and placement); (ii) news topic items (or what issues are included in the frame); (iii) cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues included); and (iv) affective attributes (valence or tone of the article or picture). Manheim (1994) also explained that valence is the tone of a news story or comment regarding certain frames, and is believed to have the potential to generate behavioral effects. By indicating discourse valuations or carrying positive and/or negative elements, balanced news frames present the extent to which the coverage favorably or unfavorably reflects the event or issue. In addition, Weaver (2007) mentioned that the frame could be studied by means of a systematic content analysis, interpretive textual analysis, or discourse analysis. Tankard (2008) remarked that framing gives quantitative researchers a way to approach ideology, a subject that mainly critical theorists have addressed. Framing may even give quantitative researchers a means of examining the hypothesis of media hegemony, which has been difficult to validate empirically.

The existing literature has identified a handful of frames that commonly occur in the news (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar, 1991; Patterson, 1993). A study by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified five news frames (attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences, and morality) that were common in the Dutch national news media coverage of the Amsterdam meetings of the European heads of state in 1997. It was found that the use of news frames depended on both the type of outlet and the type of topic. Most of the significant differences were not between media (television vs the press) but between sensationalist and serious types of news outlets. Sober and serious newspapers and television news programs often used the responsibility and conflict frames, whereas sensationalist outlets often used the human-interest frame. The five generic news frames constructed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) have been widely used in the framing analysis of a range of issues, including racial–ethnic issues, integration, immigration, drugs, and crime (Matthes & Kohring, 2008).

News is socially constructed, and it reflects not only what happens, but also the context within which it was gathered and processed (Spratt et al., 2007). It was stressed that the coverage of events (or not) and how they were covered were influenced by many considerations, including law, economics, political forces, culture, race, organizational structure of the media, and the work routines of journalists (Gan, Teo, & Detenber, 2005; Van Gorp, 2007). In a study of ideologically sensitive issues, Song (2007) found that the mainstream news media served as an institution of social control by imposing frames that marginalized causes or movements that challenged the values of the mainstream society. Alternative media, in contrast, often serve as a communication outlet for movements and causes that are ignored or marginalized by the mainstream media.

Methodology

The selected newspapers

As mentioned earlier, the daily newspapers chosen for this study are Sin Chew Daily (Chinese), The Star (English) and Utusan Malaysia (Bahasa Malaysia). These three dailies...
also have online counterparts, but the online content is almost identical to that in the printed version.

*Sin Chew* is owned by the business and media tycoon, Tiong Hiew King. It is circulated throughout Malaysia and in the neighboring countries of southern Thailand, Brunei, Indonesia, and northern Kalimantan. It is also published and printed in Indonesia and Cambodia under separate mastheads. Currently, it has a combined daily readership of 1.5 million. In Malaysia, it has the most extensive news gathering network in the country; bureaus, correspondents, and stringers are stationed in even the remotest parts of the country (Ou, 2009). According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) Malaysia 2013 Report, *Sin Chew* has an average daily circulation of approximately 400,000. The AC Nielsen 2013 survey reported that *Sin Chew* has more than 1.1 million daily readers in Malaysia. Given that there are only six million Chinese in Malaysia, or one-quarter of the total population, the daily readership of this vernacular daily has surpassed even that of the main Malay and English newspapers in both absolute terms and a per capita basis. *Sin Chew* also enjoys the highest readership among all the newspapers published in the four main languages in the country (Ou, 2009). It is noteworthy that *Sin Chew* offers extensive coverage on politics, economy, culture, and education, and it is considered the most outspoken mainstream newspaper in Malaysia (Ou, 2009; Yang & Ahmad Ishak, 2015).

*The Star* enjoys the highest circulation in the English language stream. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), one of the component parties of BN, is a major shareholder of *The Star*. The English newspapers in Malaysia are usually read by the elite and English-educated readers, who live mainly in the urban areas. Lent (1990) stated that only the readership of English newspapers could transcend the racial groupings in Malaysia. Hence, the author claimed that the English press also serves as an inter-ethnic medium.

*Utusan Malaysia* is one of the top Malay newspapers in the country. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the most dominant political party in Malaysia, holds the controlling shares in the Malay-language newspaper. Significantly, *Utusan* has always been regarded as evoking racial tensions between the Malays and non-Malays (Kua, 2010; Lee, 2010). Syed Arabi (1989) recorded that the seeds of ethnocentrism were sown among Malay newspapers that were published from the 1870s to the 1900s. They were used to foster the spirit of nationalism, and they were utilized as channels to speak out against attitudes that hindered the progress of the Malays. In fact, Syed Arabi (1989) asserted that the development of Malay political parties was made possible by the Malay press, particularly *Utusan Melayu*.

**Sampling and coding procedures**

The sample used in this study was drawn from articles published between 15 December 2009 and 28 February 2010, which represented the peak period of the “Allah” disputes and the arson attacks. This study used the census sample because scholars agree that a census is often the most informative for research that examines a particular event or series of events (Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). The units of analysis were the articles, which included straight news, editorials, columns, opinions, and letters. The articles were collected via a database search and were pulled from the respective newspapers’ online services by using the keywords “Allah” and “arson attacks”.

The framing of the “Allah” dispute was examined according to four different dimensions: (i) intensity of coverage; (ii) news sources; (iii) news frames; and (iv) valence of the articles. The intensity of coverage was studied from three angles: (i) number of news items; (ii) type of news items; and (iii) mean size of news items (measured by word count).
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The study employed the inductive or emergent coding approach to analyze the news sources. The researchers outlined the coding categories after a preliminary examination of the data. The categories of the news sources used in this study are as follows: (i) United Malays National Organization (UMNO) leaders; (ii) Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) leaders; (iii) Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) leaders; (iv) Malaysian People's Movement Party (Gerakan) leaders; (v) Opposition leaders; (vi) Royal Police Malaysia (PDRM); (vii) professional representatives; (viii) religious representatives; (ix) civilians; and (x) others.

The study adopted and modified the five most commonly used news frames (conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality, and responsibility) identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) (see Appendix). The theoretical definitions of the five frames are as follows:

(1) Conflict – emphasizes disagreement and conflict between individuals, groups, parties, or institutions; an individual, group, party, or institution reproaches another; dichotomizes or labels the good and bad.
(2) Consequences – reports an event, issue, or problem in terms of the consequences it has for individuals, groups, parties, institutions, or the country; reports the outcome of a court case.
(3) Responsibility – presents an event, issue, or problem such that it attributes responsibility for its cause or solution either to the government or to an individual, group, party, or institution.
(4) Morality – puts the event, issue or problem in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions; emphasizes collaboration and fellowship.
(5) Human interest – brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event or issue; refers to an effort to personalize the news.

The valence or tone of the article refers to the attitude expressed towards any individual, group, party, or institution by its author (Baumgartner & Wirth, 2012; Feeley & Frederick, 2007). This study uses the categories of supportive, critical, and neutral for the analysis of attitudes expressed towards the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims:

(1) Supportive – conveys a favorable attitude towards the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims; supports or justifies it; contains quotes by individuals who approve the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims.
(2) Critical – conveys a negative attitude towards the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims; causes readers to form a negative opinion towards the issue; contains unfavorable descriptions of the issue.
(3) Neutral – portrays the issue neither favorably nor unfavorably.

Data analysis and inter-coder reliability

The 1254 articles collected from the three newspapers (Sin Chew Daily, The Star, and Utusan Malaysia) were analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages. To ensure the reliability of this study, a graduate student in communication was chosen as the second coder. During the training session, the first author (who was also the first coder) and the second coder coded 50 articles chosen randomly from the sample.
collected in this study. Disagreements were analyzed, and some additional explanations were included in the coding instructions provided in the codebook.

Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2005) advocated the random selection of content samples for inter-coder reliability testing. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) suggested that between 10% and 25% of the content should be tested. Therefore, the inter-coder reliability for this study was established by randomly selecting 10% of the news items, which was equivalent to 125 articles. Using Holsti’s formula (cited in Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), it was found that the inter-coder reliabilities of the news frames and valence were 0.92 and 0.97 respectively.

**Findings**

**Intensity of coverage and news sources**

A total of 1254 articles about the “Allah” dispute were collected from the three newspapers. *Sin Chew* contributed the most number of news items (446 articles), followed by
As indicated in Table 1, the majority of the articles were straight news. One interesting finding was that only *Sin Chew* published background articles, which were deemed essential when an event’s coverage was sustained over time. *The Star* had the highest percentage of opinion pieces (24.25%), while *Sin Chew* contributed the highest number of words (428 words). Table 2 shows that the UMNO leaders were the most salient news sources for the three newspapers.

### News frames

Table 3 shows that all the three newspapers employed conflict as the most dominant frame, followed by consequences, responsibility, and morality. Only *Sin Chew* used the human-interest frame in its coverage of the “Allah” dispute.

#### Conflict frame

Although conflict appeared to be the most salient frame used by the three newspapers, their focuses were varied. The most salient aspect of the conflict frame in *Sin Chew* was the criticism of the government. For example, the then opposition leader Zaid Ibrahim contended that UMNO and the government must take full responsibility for the attacks on churches. He criticized that the irresponsible fanning emotions by UMNO leaders had brought about a dangerous situation. According to Zaid, the government could easily have consulted with the churches in Sabah and Sarawak, but instead UMNO chose to politicize the sensitive issue (*Sin Chew Daily*, 8 January 2010).

In addition, *Sin Chew* also reported that the former senior vice-president of UMNO, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, accused the ruling party of promoting communal sentiment. He argued that the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) was holding a plural and moderate position while UMNO was entrenched in an intolerant hardline position that had no known parallel in the Muslim world. He also asserted that the BN was increasingly driven by sensitivities rather than principles. According to Razaleigh, only the “gutter politicians” would resort to fanning the sensitivities of the people in pursuing their agenda. He insisted that if the government of a multiracial society could not rise above sentiment, it was clearly too weak or too self-interested to hold the country together (*Sin Chew Daily*, 16 January 2010).

A columnist for *Sin Chew* pointed out that a Malay-language daily claimed that because Muslims were not united, they were being threatened by the non-Muslims. She criticized that it was extremely irresponsible and dangerous for the newspaper to use the “Allah”
incident to fan the flames of conflict (*Sin Chew Daily*, 10 January 2010). Another columnist wrote that the government officials in Malaysia were self-centered, and no one dared to step forward to take responsibility for the “Allah” issue. He asserted that many embarrassing incidents happened repeatedly in Malaysia because no one dared to admit their involvement. Even worse, when problems happened, the first response of the leaders was to cover it up as much as possible and then deny their responsibility for it. The columnist also criticized *Utusan* for evoking racial tension between the Malays and non-Malays and asked why the authorities did not give the Malay newspaper a stern warning (*Sin Chew Daily*, 13 January 2010).

By engaging the conflict frame, *The Star* mainly reflected voices that supported or criticized the court’s ruling and the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims. For example, the former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, was reported to argue that the word “Allah” was exclusive to Muslims, whereas the word “Tuhan” or “God” in English should be used by people of other religions. Moreover, he disagreed with the government’s effort to resolve the “Allah” controversy through the courts. He explained that the laws did not take into consideration sensitivity factors that could provoke tension and animosity between the followers of different religions (*The Star*, 13 January 2010). In contrast, the president of PAS, Abdul Hadi Awang, supported the High Court’s decision. Hadi said that the word was not restricted to Muslims and that Christians and Jews were allowed to use it. He asserted that the principle of religious freedom is championed by Islam because human beings could not be forced to profess any religion except through their own free will (*The Star*, 6 January 2010). It is interesting to note that although *The Star* had the highest percentage of conflict frames, it was much more moderate in its coverage compared to *Sin Chew* because it did not reflect voices that criticized the government.

Although the findings showed that conflict was reported the most often in *Utusan*, only one of the actors in the conflict – the government – was presented. *Utusan* represented the ideal view of the government by downplaying negative topics and excluding dissenting voices. The data also suggested that *Utusan* diverged in its inclusion of some aspects of the religious disputes, and it failed to capture some of the more robust differences in the ways these issues were discussed and debated by the people. Furthermore, the conflict frame in *Utusan* constructed an antagonistic frontier between Muslims and non-Muslims. In the dichotomy of “us” and “them”, the Malay-language newspaper explicitly described non-Muslims as challenging and threatening the status of Islam and Malays. For example, Professor Dr Mahmood Zuhdi, the deputy dean of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization at the International Islamic University, claimed that the division among Muslims in the country had caused the followers of other religions to take advantage of the weakness of the Muslim community. He foresaw that the former would continue to do so if the powerful and influential political leaders persisted in not realizing and not regretting the situation (*Utusan Malaysia*, 1 January 2010).

*Utusan* also focused on defending UMNO’s position and attacking opposing views. A columnist said that some Malay leaders were not embarrassed to support the Catholic Church. They included two opposition leaders, Khalid Samad and Dzulkifley Ahmad. The columnist criticized both Khalid and Dzulkifley for not understanding the concepts of God in Islam and Christianity, claiming they were traitors to the Islam preachers in the country (*Utusan Malaysia*, 12 January 2010). In addition, the UMNO leaders were portrayed as defenders of Malay rights, and the vast majority of news reports in *Utusan* displayed a noticeable absence of any response by non-UMNO spokespersons or representatives.
Consequences, responsibility, moral, and human interest frames

The frames of consequences, responsibility, and morals found in the three newspapers were used more or less to report the same stories. For example, it was reported that the Malaysian judiciary’s website had been hacked into and defaced and that *The Herald*’s website had also been hacked into three times after the High Court’s landmark decision. In addition, the office of lawyer Derek Fernandez, who was representing *The Herald*, was also broken into (*Sin Chew Daily*, 8 January 2010).

Furthermore, the police was reported as warning that stern actions would be taken against any group that staged illegal gatherings to demonstrate against the Catholic Church. However, Prime Minister Najib said that Muslim groups would be allowed to carry out their protests after Friday prayers as long as they confined them to mosques. He explained that the protests were allowed because Muslim groups were permitted to express their views on the “Allah” issue. In addition, the Home Ministry also approved police permits for several Muslim groups to hold their protests in various mosques in the city center (*The Star*, 8 January 2010).

In the frame of consequences, *Utusan* provided information about the actions taken by the government, the Islamic Religious Council in various states, and the Islamic NGOs in response to the court’s ruling. In addition, a group known as Against the Use of “Allah” by Non-Muslims in Facebook had attracted more than 200,000 people to be friends of the group (*Utusan Malaysia*, 13 January 2010).

The frame of responsibility used by *Sin Chew* and *The Star* emphasized the need for inter-religious dialogue. For example, the group chief editor of *The Star*, Wong Chun Wai, called for the setting up of a national consultative council on religious harmony. Wong asserted that at the moment in Malaysia no one body encompassed all faiths, which meant that contentious and critical issues involving inter-faith relations had not been resolved at the onset. He added that the consultative council should be headed by the prime minister, the minister in charge of religion and national unity, the leaders of the main political parties representing the various ethnic groups, the opposition leaders, and various relevant religious leaders (*The Star*, 17 January 2010). By pursuing the responsibility frame, *Utusan* attributed the task of resolving the “Allah” dispute to the government and Islamic organizations.

The three newspapers highlighted the ethical values of Islam in their frame of morality. For example, *Utusan* explicated that it was not the teaching of Islam to insult other religions or to destroy places of worship (*Utusan Malaysia*, 9 January 2010).

As mentioned earlier, the frame of human interest was found only in *Sin Chew*. The Chinese-language newspaper reported the reaction of Christians following the arson attacks. Two female church members grieved deeply when they saw that the Metro Tabernacle Church had burned. They kneeled on the ground and sang hymns. While weeping, one member even used a video camera to record the scene (*Sin Chew Daily*, 9 January 2010).

Valence

*The Star* was the most supportive of the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims, and *Utusan* was the most critical (see Table 4). The findings showed that *Sin Chew* was the most neutral newspaper in the coverage of the “Allah” dispute.
Discussion

The differences in the number of articles and words published by the three newspapers indicated that they paid unequal amounts of attention to the “Allah” dispute. It is noteworthy that only Sin Chew and The Star carried editorials on the issues. Because editorials are “barometers of the thinking of the most powerful voices within the newspaper and corporate hierarchy” (Fahmy, 2005, p. 390), it is obvious that both Sin Chew and The Star were very concerned about the inter-religious conflicts. In their study on the issues and practices in religious reporting, Loo and Mustafa (2010) asserted that the existence of conflict is an inevitable part of human interaction. Therefore, the question should not be how to prevent it but rather how to deal with it in order to produce the best possible and least violent outcomes for all the parties concerned. The authors called for newspapers to provide a fair, balanced, and neutral coverage of the inter-ethnic conflicts. They also stated that newspapers should provide a greater number of in-depth analyses and discussions rather than merely focusing on the straightforward reporting of the facts. This would provide the public with access to balanced and comprehensive information and ensure better understanding of the issues. It would also help the public to discuss inter-ethnic issues in a constructive manner.

Entman (1993) argued that to some extent, the source is the story. This study found that the three newspapers consistently used UMNO leaders as their major news source, which indicates that the newspapers allowed the dominant political party to act as the opinion leader in defining the “Allah” dispute. Furthermore, the close examination of Utusan revealed that the voices of non-Muslims were excluded. This degree of bias in the selection of sources underlined the newspaper’s considerable gatekeeping function in determining both the content and the perspective of its news stories. Loo and Mustafa (2010) emphasized that information should be sourced from several parties to obtain a diversity of opinions surrounding inter-ethnic issues. Nonetheless, the voices of reason and moderation ought to be given prominence over extreme views. Newspapers should avoid letting dominant parties define themselves simply by quoting their leaders’ restatements of familiar demands or positions. Instead, newspapers should ask civilians and grassroots organizations to express their sentiments and viewpoints and to suggest solutions to the inter-ethnic conflicts. The newspapers should also find out from civilians whether the position stated by their leaders or the government is the only way or the best way to achieve the changes they want. Subsequently, the newspapers should query the government regarding the ideas and perspectives put forward by the civilians and grassroots organizations.

This study found that although conflict appeared to be the most salient frame used by the dailies, their emphases varied. The dissimilar coverage of the same issue by the newspapers denoted the diverse points of view held by them, which were rooted in different political beliefs and institutional practices. Sin Chew was vocal in its news coverage

Table 4. Valences for the “Allah” dispute.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sin Chew (n = 446)</th>
<th>The Star (n = 165)</th>
<th>Utusan (n = 330)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>33.67</td>
<td>34.48</td>
<td>7.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>23.62</td>
<td>37.93</td>
<td>73.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>42.71</td>
<td>27.59</td>
<td>19.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and reflected a counter-hegemonic discourse. *The Star* was found to undertake a moderate approach, and *Utusan* strongly supported the status quo. The frames built by *The Star* and *Utusan* could be attributed to the fact that these two newspapers were inclined to serve the politically vested interests of their owners.

*Sin Chew* reported a greater number of voices that criticized the banning of the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims, and it condemned the Government, UMNO, and BN. *Sin Chew* has been acknowledged as the voice of the Chinese community (Ou, 2009). As mentioned earlier, Chinese – mostly non-Muslim – account for 24.6% of the population in Malaysia. Because they are considered a minority, they look to the Chinese press to defend and maintain their interests in this pluralistic country.

Referring to the Sword of Damocles, the group editor-in-chief of *Sin Chew*, N. C. Siew (cited in Ou, 2009), said, “There are five swords, not just one, hanging above the heads of all media workers in this country.” The five swords refer to the five specific legislations that restrict press freedom in Malaysia: the Publications and Printing Presses Act; the Internal Security Act; the Sedition Act; the Official Secrets Act; and the Defamation Act. In this multi-ethnic and multireligious society, *Sin Chew* has to tread a fine line in its reportage by balancing views from all perspectives and by operating within the extremely tight regulatory restrictions relating to publications (Ou, 2009).

In a seminar organized by the Malaysian Press Institute, C. C. Liew, the managing director and editorial director of the Sin Chew Media Corporation Group, made a very succinct and precise observation. He likened the five legal provisions to the perimeter of a circle:

If you have no guts as media practitioners, you will stay nearer to the center as it is safer there. If you have always complained about restricted press freedom, but you have chosen to stay in the center, then it is difficult for you to achieve anything. Actually, from the perimeter to the center, there is plenty of space. Any good journalist should try to push the borders. Before breaching any legal provisions, there is actually ample space to work with. (Ou, 2009, p. 127)

In their examination of the gatekeeping process undertaken by Malaysian newspapers in reporting inter-ethnic conflicts, Yang and Ahmad Ishak (2015) found that gatekeeping took place at the levels of the individual, routine, organization, and institutional. It was documented that the ownership of *Utusan* and *The Star* had influenced their gatekeeping role. The authors also found that political interest was the primary external factor that influenced the gatekeeping role of the newspapers in their coverage of inter-ethnic conflicts. In addition, regarding the role of Chinese press in Malaysia, Ou wrote that “[t]he democratic system in the country has failed to reflect the aspirations of the public, and this is why the media is confronted with huge challenges.” Furthermore,

In the 21st century, we are still faced with problems like injustice, discrimination, oppression and various unreasonable conducts. The Malaysian Chinese press has played its role by promoting dialogue between differing parties. We are of the view that both parties conducting the dialogue should be sincere. Only with sincerity can we be more understanding and forgiving. As a medium for dialogue between different races and religions, a watchdog and as a media conveying information, Chinese press continues to play its role without fear or favor but with self-restraint whenever the situation require. (Ou, 2009, p. 278)

In view of the ethnic and religious circumstances in Malaysia, it is disappointing and worrying to find that although explicitly polemical articles were published by *Utusan*, no advice, warning, or action was undertaken by the government against this content.
Therefore, it should not be difficult for savvy readers to question whether the government practiced a double standard because the UMNO owns *Utusan*. The newspaper reaches approximately 859,000 readers (Selva, 2014), so the effect of this radical coverage on such a large proportion of the public is also alarming. As mentioned earlier, Islamic concerns are central in the definition of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. This is because the Malay-Muslim majority exerts a strong influence on cultural and political developments in the country (Mutalib, cited in Lee, 2004). Furthermore, any movement away from the status quo puts the *bumi* political elites at risk of being accused of not standing up for Islam and the Malay identity. Therefore, there is a tendency for Malay politicians to co-opt Islam for political gain (Gatsiounis, 2006; Kahn, 2005).

According to Loo and Mustafa (2010), it is important for newspapers to maintain the delicate balance between nation-building and ethnic aspirations. When reporting inter-ethnic conflicts, journalists should strive for the common ground shared by the affected parties rather than highlighting and over-emphasizing their differences or promoting conflict between the communities concerned. Newspapers should avoid focusing exclusively on the suffering, fears, and grievances of only one party or ethnic group. Instead, newspapers should highlight issues that serve as a reminder of the personal, familial, social, economic, and political costs of prolonged conflict. In addition, these authors emphasized that newspapers should be proactive instead of reactive in their coverage of inter-ethnic conflicts. Instead of reporting issues only when they arise, journalists should write about ethnic and religious issues on a regular basis in order to bring about better knowledge, greater understanding, and increased tolerance of all religions. Instead of the routine frame of conflict, newspapers should provide more space for the coverage of issues and developments relating to inter-ethnic or inter-faith dialogue and cooperation. Significantly, Loo and Mustafa (2010), cautioned that to over-emphasize conflicts as being either episodic events or inevitable consequences without clearly explaining their political, economic, and social motivations is to distort why, how, and what actually took place. Consequently, the lack of contextual reporting exacerbates misunderstanding among the public. Examining the underlying political, economic, and social causes of inter-ethnic conflicts will help to inform and educate the public, thus contributing to bridging the perceptual gaps among different ethnic groups.

**Conclusion**

Framing analysis allows researchers to examine the roles of media in the development of social and political issues. Framing also reflects conflict between dominant social norms and efforts for change. This study examined the aspects on which newspapers focused to promote citizens’ understanding of the “Allah” dispute. The findings indicated that the newspapers reported the conflicts with differing intensity and prominence. The newspapers also relied on different news sources. Although conflict appeared to be the most salient frame used by the dailies, the aspects highlighted by them varied. *Sin Chew* was vocal in its news coverage while reflecting a counter-hegemonic discourse. *The Star* was found to undertake a moderate approach, and *Utusan* strongly supported the status quo. The frames built by *The Star* and *Utusan* could be attributed to the fact that these two newspapers were inclined to serve the politically vested interests of their owners. Future research could conduct a comparative analysis of newspapers in West and East Malaysia because the socio-political, economic, and cultural backgrounds of these two regions are quite different. In addition, a comparative analysis of mainstream and alternative online newspapers (e.g., *Malaysiakini*, *Malaysian Insider*, and *Harakah*) could also be carried out to investi-
gate the ideological differences between them. Finally, in order to investigate the influence of news frames on readers’ perceptions, it would be interesting to juxtapose the findings of this study with public opinion data to measure the public’s perceptions of the “Allah” dispute.

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Disclosure statement

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Appendix. The five most commonly used news frames (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000) 

1. Attribution of responsibility

- Does the story suggest that some level of government has the ability to alleviate the problem? 
- Does the story suggest that some level of the government is responsible for the issue/problem? 
- Does the story suggest solution(s) to the issue/problem? 
- Does the story suggest that an individual (or group of people in society) is responsible for the issue/problem? 
- Does the story suggest the problem requires urgent action?
2. Human interest frame

- Does the story provide a human example or “human face” on the issue?
- Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy, caring, sympathy, or compassion?
- Does the story emphasize how individuals and groups are affected by the issue/problem?
- Does the story go into the private or personal lives of the actors?
- Does the story contain visual information that might generate feelings of outrage, empathy, caring, sympathy, or compassion?

3. Conflict frame

- Does the story reflect disagreement between parties–individuals–groups–countries?
- Does one party–individual–group–country reproach another?
- Does the story refer to two sides or to more than two sides of the issue/problem?
- Does the story refer to winners and losers?

4. Morality frame

- Does the story contain any moral message?
- Does the story refer to morality, God and other religious tenets?
- Does the story offer specific social prescriptions about how to behave?

5. Economic frame

- Is there a mention of financial losses or gains now or in the future?
- Is there a mention of the costs/degree of expense involved?
- Is there a reference to economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action?
- Does the story contain visual information that might generate feelings of outrage, empathy, caring, sympathy, or compassion?