Asian Journal of Communication

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rajc20

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Framing controversy over language policy in Malaysia: the coverage of PPSMI reversal (teaching of mathematics and science in English) by Malaysian newspapers

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(Received 15 February 2011; final version received 5 December 2011)

In 2003, the Malaysian Government announced the policy of Teaching of Mathematics and Science in English [ETeMS or better known by its Malay acronym, \textit{Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris} (PPSMI)]. The policy has, however, caused a furore, with both Malay nationalists and Chinese educationists treating the decision as an attack on their identity. Later in July 2009, the Malaysian Government announced to reverse the PPSMI policy starting from 2012. Researchers have long understood news as an artefact of a socially constructed reality. In making news, journalists shape a reality that reflects the political economic and ideological boundaries within which they work. By employing framing as the theoretical framework and content analysis as the research method, this study examined what pictures newspapers have created for citizens’ understanding of the reversal of PPSMI policy. It was found that the mainstream newspapers framed the issue in similar ways, which was to explain and justify the reversal. Meanwhile, the alternative newspaper reflected what was mostly left out while the alternative newspaper reflected what was mostly left out and provided a counter-hegemonic discourse.

\textbf{Keywords:} PPSMI; framing; language policy; vernacular newspapers; alternative newspapers

\section*{Introduction}

The structure of newspapers in Malaysia is strongly influenced by the multi-lingual nature of the nation's multi-ethnic population and, therefore, reflects its pluralistic nature. Newspapers are published in different languages to cater to the respective major ethnic groups. According to Selva (2010), there are currently 51 newspapers in Malaysia, and 35 of them are published in Peninsular Malaysia while 16 are published in East Malaysia. In addition, 16 of these are published in English, 13 in Bahasa Malaysia, 19 in Chinese and 3 in Tamil. Selva (2010) also pointed out that Bahasa Malaysia dailies reach 46.5\% of the Malaysian population, followed by English dailies (28.7\%), Chinese dailies (24.1\%) and Tamil dailies (0.7\%).

The vernacular newspapers in Malaysia tend to play central roles in shaping political and social reality for their ethnic groups because the editors and journalists of these newspapers are usually members of the community elite. While championing
the interests of their groups, these vernacular newspapers undertake different approaches to problems because different ethnic groups in Malaysia are often times perceived to largely fall within differing bands of living standards and economic status (Khoo, 2000; Kua, 2002; Mansor, 2005; Ooi, 2006).

The analysis of press freedom in Malaysia revealed that the media face significant legislative constraints (Brown, 2005; George, 2005; Netto, 2002; Rodan, 2005; Smeltzer, 2008; Tan & Zawawi, 2008; Wang, 2001; Zaharom, 2000). Besides, media ownership by political parties and connected business individuals is another major threat to press freedom. Nevertheless, the introduction of Internet represents a fundamental discontinuity in the old approach to media management in Malaysia. Internet became the medium that Malaysian citizens were allowed to use for mass communication without first having to secure a Government license. Increasingly easy access to e-mail and the World Wide Web globally allows politically disenfranchised groups to communicate with like-minded or sympathetic audiences. Furthermore, opposition groups have been able to have a voice too. Tang (2009) asserted that in the aftermath of the 2008 general election, the common consensus was that the Internet was a significant contributor to the shift among the electorate in favour of the opposition. Among the various independent news sites, scholars regarded *Malaysiakini* as the most interesting and successful one (George, 2005; McDaniel, 2002; Rodan, 2005; Tan & Zawawi, 2007). Furthermore, *Malaysiakini* is said to often set the agenda for other news media (Chandran, 2006; Steele, 2009). It has also won warm praise from around the world and a number of international awards for journalism (Chandran, 2006; Steele, 2009; Tong, 2004).

**Background of the study**

Malaysia is a former British colony of 27.2 million people with a predominance of Malays, Chinese and Indians. Malaysia gained its independence in 1957 and Bahasa Melayu was established as the national language in 1963 with the passing of the National Language Act. Since then, the role and status of English were radically reduced. From being the sole medium of instruction in the education system during colonial times, English was relegated to being taught in schools as a second language.

One of the main functions of Bahasa Melayu was to provide a common means of communication across varying ethnic groups, thus contributing to the establishment of a national identity. The Government supported a major programme for cultivation and modernisation of Bahasa Melayu. The Institute of Language and Literature (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, DBP) was established to implement policies concerned with the development, use and usage of the national language.

Language and education in Malaysia have always been closely linked to ethnicity. The present Malaysian educational system comprises primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. The primary school level comprises parallel systems of national primary schools and national-type primary schools (vernacular schools). Both are Government funded and use the national curriculum; they are differentiated by language of instruction. In national primary schools, the medium is Bahasa Malaysia; in national-type primary schools the medium is either Mandarin or Tamil.

After six years of primary education, students proceed to either public or private secondary schools. Public secondary schools use Bahasa Malaysia as the language of instruction; the Independent Chinese Secondary Schools are self-funded private...
schools where Mandarin is used. They are monitored by the Dong Jiao Zong, which comprises two authorities, that is, the United Chinese School Committees’ Association (UCSCA) and the United Chinese School Teachers’ Association (UCSTA). Dong Jiao Zong coordinates the curriculum used in the schools and organises the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) standardised test. Despite this, the schools are independent of each other. Unlike public/government schools, every independent school is free to make its own decisions and manage its own affairs. In addition, other private secondary schools exist in Malaysia, such as the Islamic religious schools where Arabic and Bahasa Malaysia are the mediums of instruction; these are Government funded. At the tertiary level, public universities teach via Bahasa Malaysia, while private universities use English. In both primary and secondary education, the teaching of English is compulsory.

Language policy and politics in Malaysia
At independence in 1957, Malays were the dominant ethnic group (close to half of the total population), the Chinese were just over a third and the Indians made up 10% of the population. Even though in demographic terms the percentage of Malays was minimally larger than the other ethnic groups, it was their political power and the fact that they considered themselves as bumiputera or ‘sons of the soil’ in contrast with the other ethnic groups who were of immigrant ancestry, largely from China and India, that gave them not only the symbolic but also the concrete power to influence decision-making on language and nation (Gill, 2005).

Ridge (2004) recognised that language policy during the early years of independence was clearly focused on Malay identity and status. He added that Pennycook (cited in Ridge, 2004) described it as ‘the struggle for ascendancy of Malay politics, language and culture’. Other scholars (Abdullah, 2005; Mandal, 2000; Rajadurai, 2004; Smith, 2003) found that there were a few factors that contributed to the switch in language policy to Bahasa Melayu. One of them being the strong link perceived between medium of instruction and economic opportunities. In the former colonial system, English schools were located in urban areas and were mainly attended by non-Malays and a few Malays who came from the elite. Therefore, English became the language of economic opportunity and social mobility. Asmah (cited in Gill, 2005) addressed that the situation resulted in an identification of a racial group with a particular type of vocation or industry and hence its identification with wealth or poverty.

This led to a high degree of frustration amongst the Malay nationalist group. To rectify this social and economic imbalance, the Malays believed that the institution of Bahasa Melayu as the national language and its establishment by law as official language would provide them the educational and administrative capital which would lead to its development as a language of higher status. Making their language official would provide the Malays with linguistic capital and economic opportunity which would lead to social and professional mobility.

The Chinese and the Indians did not offer much resistance. This was because the Malays used the issue of citizenship as a bargaining tool. Where before citizenship was granted to non-Malays only by right of birth, in the post-independence period, non-Malays could apply for citizenship provided he or she met with the three stipulated requirements: residential, good conduct and language (Azirah, 2009; Gill, 2005).
Teaching of mathematics and science in English

Although the Government strongly upheld the status of Bahasa Melayu, it did not attempt to control language use in the private sector, including business and industry, where globalisation pressure led to a growing demand for English (Mandal, 2000; Tan, 2005). In 1991, the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, publicly expressed his grave concern at the poor results that students had attained in the national English language examinations. The public sector also attested that many local graduates had failed to secure jobs because of their lack of competence in the English language, evident particularly during interviews. This lack of proficiency was seen as contributing to graduate unemployment in 2002 when some 44,000 were unemployed (Chan & Tan, 2006).

In 2003, a year before he stepped down, Mahathir made the startling announcement about the policy of Teaching of Mathematics and Science in English (ETeMS or better known by its Malay acronym, PPSMI which stands for Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris). Mahathir felt that Malaysians need to master English in order to compete in the global market. He asserted that English is to be learnt for its utilitarian value, for employment and for guaranteeing access to the science and technology of the West (Chan & Tan, 2006; Gill, 2006). The PPSMI policy was then implemented in phases, starting with Year One, Form One and Lower Six in 2003.

However, this policy caused a furore, with both Malay nationalists and Chinese educationists treating the decision as an attack on their identity. Subsequently, the most intense protest took place on 7 March 2009, when The Movement for the Abolition of Teaching of Mathematics and Science in English (GMP, Gerakan Mansuhkan PPSMI) organised a protest march from the National Mosque to the National Palace in Kuala Lumpur.

Gerakan Mansuhkan PPSMI (GMP) is a coalition of 14 NGOs, some of its committee members included opposition politicians. There were 8000 people who took part in the march; many protesters wore T-shirts with the words 152, in reference to Article 152 of the Federal Constitution which states that Bahasa Melayu is the national language. Although police detained 124 people for questioning, two GMP leaders – national laureate, A. Samad Said, and former director of the Institute of Language and Literature, Hassan Ahmad, managed to get past police cordon to hand the coalition’s memorandum to the king. The memorandum stated that the people were seeking royal intervention on the controversial policy, which is said to be implemented at the expense of mother tongue education (Veeranggan, 2009).

Later in July 2009, the Malaysian Government announced the reversal of the PPSMI policy starting from 2012. This means that students in national primary and secondary schools would study the two subjects in Bahasa Malaysia while those in vernacular schools would be taught in their mother tongue (Khoo & Chapman, 2009).

Like the announcement of the PPSMI policy in 2003, the announcement of its reversal had also generated different reaction from various quarters. While political groups, Malay nationalists, Chinese and Tamil educationists welcomed the move, many parents were unhappy over the decision. Mahathir, who was behind the original PPSMI policy, also expressed sadness on the reversal (Goh & Chapman, 2009).
Objectives and research questions
In view of the controversy over language policy and ethnic identity, this study aimed to compare the coverage on the reversal of PPSMI policy by mainstream Malay, English and Chinese as well as alternative newspapers. The following research questions were examined for the purpose of this study:

RQ1: How extensively was the reversal of PPSMI policy covered by the newspapers?
RQ2: What was the news source used by the newspapers in their coverage of the reversal of PPSMI policy?
RQ3: What was the news topic reported by the newspapers in their coverage of the reversal of PPSMI policy?
RQ4: What was the slant of the articles published by the newspapers in their coverage of the reversal of PPSMI policy?

Mass media control and ownership in Malaysia: an overview
State control of mass media is a central part of the political system in Malaysia. There are two major mechanisms – legal restriction and ownership control – that are employed by the Government to restrict media freedom in the country. Various laws such as the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA), Internal Security Act (ISA), Official Secret Act (OSA) and Sedition Act (SA) allow the Government to impose prior restraints on publication, post-publication punishments and penalties for the acquisition of official information.

The effects of the PPPA on the freedom of the media and the development of civil society in Malaysia have been far reaching (Mohd Azizuddin, 2005). For example during the political tension of 1987, three major newspapers, the English-medium The Star, the Chinese Sin Chew Jit Poh and the Malay weekly Watan had their licenses revoked. They resumed publication in 1988 but the ban resulted in changes in the editorial staff of each of the above publications, which engendered a climate of self-censorship among journalists, a trend which continued through the 1990s (Wang, 2001; Zaharom, 2002). This provoked serious domestic criticism of the allegedly one-sided coverage by the mainstream press of the Anwar Ibrahim case and the reformasi movement in 1998 and 1999, respectively (Netto, 2002; Rodan, 2005). In addition, Mohd Azizuddin (2005) also pointed out that there are two reasons why the Government sought to restrict the freedom of the press and introduce PPPA in Malaysia. First, it is to ensure racial order and, second, to limit the influence of foreign presses on the Malaysian people’s attitudes and minds towards the Government and country as a whole.

Of all legal mechanisms at the disposal of the Government, the one that attracts the strongest criticism is the ISA (Abu, 2003; Gomez, 2004; Kua, 1999, 2002; Zaharom, 2002). Brown (2005) mentioned that while ISA is not exclusively limited to the media, nonetheless such regulations often contribute to a form of self-censorship as journalists steer clear of coverage that might lead to their prosecution. As a result, most journalism activities in Malaysia are tame, and reporters have no effective organisational voice to fight for greater freedom.

Scholars (Abu, 2003; Gomez, 2004; Mohd Azizuddin, 2005; Wang, 2001; Zaharom, 2002) addressed that the OSA has imposed wide and largely unjustified restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and of the press; and on the examination and discussion of issues of public interest by the political opposition.
Zaid (2007) also pointed out that the Government consistently invokes the OSA as an excuse to avoid sharing information, even with Parliament. By curbing access to public information and information relating to public interest, the electorate's right to know was curtailed and the means to uphold public accountability were weakened.

After the May 13 racial riots, the SA was tightened for purposes of national stability. The Government strictly enforced this law and prosecuted anyone who questioned the Malay special rights; Malay Rulers’ sovereignty; citizenship status of non-Malays; the national language and other communities’ languages (Farish, 2002; Kua, 2007). As a result of the May 13 racial riots, the SA has also been used to prevent the media from publishing news that could create anger or disharmonious relations between races in Malaysia (McDaniel, 2002).

The media ownership in Malaysia is directly and indirectly controlled by the Government or government-linked individuals. Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) has been owned and controlled by the Government since its inception. Both radio and television come under the charge of the Ministry of Information, which provided the following guidelines for their operation (Wang, 2001):

1. To explain in-depth, and with the widest possible coverage, the policies and programmes on the Government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the public;
2. To stimulate public interest and opinion, in order to achieve changes in line with the requirements of the Government;
3. To assist in promoting civic consciousness and fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture; and
4. To provide suitable elements of popular education, general information and entertainment.

Media Prima is an investment arm of the ruling party, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). It owns New Straits Times, Business Times, Malay Mail, Berita Harian, Harian Metro and Shin Min Daily News, TV3, NTV7, 8TV, TV9, Fly FM and Hot FM. Besides, Utusan Malaysia and Kosmo! are published by Utusan Melayu (M) Berhad, which is also related to UMNO (Netto, 2002; Tan & Zawawi, 2008). The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) also control a substantial part of the mainstream media. MCA, through its official holding company, Huaren Holding Sdn Bhd, owns The Star, RedFM 104.9 and 988 (Tan & Zawawi, 2008). There are two Tamil newspapers in Malaysia – Tamil Nesan and Malaysia Nanban and their ownership rests mainly in the hands of MIC president Samy Vellu and his wife (Brown, 2005; Wang, 2001).

Business tycoon Vincent Tan, a close associate of the former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir and other BN leaders, owns The Sun and MiTV (Brown, 2005; Wang, 2001). However, the All Asia Television and Radio Company (ASTRO) is owned by Ananda Krishnan and Tunku Mahmud Besar Burhanuddin. It was also revealed that Krishnan has a close relationship with Mahathir and was, therefore, able to secure a media license (Mohd Azizuddin, 2005, Brown, 2005).

McDaniel (2002) found that the Chinese-language newspapers in Malaysia are relatively more independent when compared to their Malay- and English-language counterparts. Sin Chew Daily, Guang Ming Daily, Nanyang Siang Pau and China
Press are owned by yet another business and media tycoon Tiong Hiew King, while Oriental Daily is owned by Lau Hui Kang (Tan & Zawawi, 2008).

While corporate control of the media by the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition as a whole helps perpetuate the regime’s dominance, it also provides individual parties within the coalition with the means for intra-coalition competition and negotiation (Brown, 2005). When the Malaysian Government decided to implement PPSMI in 2003, the policy was strongly opposed by the Dong Jiao Zong, a Chinese education group that is traditionally powerful and respected in the community. In the face of such protests, Gerakan, the Malaysian People’s Movement Party (the second-largest Chinese-based party in the BN) and subsequently the MCA, both openly declared their opposition to the policy (Brown, 2005).

In response to this dissent, the UMNO-controlled newspapers launched a blistering crusade against the Chinese parties in the coalition. Utusan Malaysia was the most vehement critic; its regular columnist Awang Sulung accused the parties of arrogance and a superiority complex. More restrained, but nonetheless critical, was the New Straits Times group of newspapers. When the MCA officially announced its opposition to the policy, the New Sunday Times accused the party of selfishness (Brown, 2005). In contrast, coverage of the issue in the MCA-controlled The Star emphasised the process of reaching a compromise as well as the spirit of muafakat (consensus) within the BN. The Star presented the MCA as taking a moderate and informed stand. The controversy was downplayed and the issue was rarely featured as front-page leads. Reports from The Star highlighted conciliatory comments from UMNO ministers and officials, and the differences were presented simply as a matter of implementation rather than policy disagreement. Editorials and commentaries described the debate as vigorous democracy at work and anticipated a win-win solution (Brown, 2005).

History and background of the vernacular newspapers in Malaysia

An important characteristic of the vernacular newspapers in Malaysia is their tendency to concentrate on events important to their respective communities (Halimahton, Ngu, & Raman, 2006; McDaniel, 1994; Mustafa, 2010; Syed Arabi, 1989). This phenomenon has its roots in the colonial era. Early Chinese newspapers in Malaya were partisan and sympathetic to the Chinese Revolution in China or focused their attention on business in Malaya. The relationship between the Chinese newspaper and their readers is based on trust. Today, the newspapers build trust by promoting traditional virtues and values strongly held by most Chinese people in Malaysia. At the same time, the Chinese community put a very strong emphasis on education as a priority and they believe that ‘the poor should not be denied an education’. The Malaysian Chinese community strived hard to establish its present Chinese school system, one of the most comprehensive Chinese education systems outside the Greater Chinese region and among the Chinese community in Southeast Asia. Fund-raising events for Chinese schools are common. Every year, millions are donated to support Chinese education in the nation. Understanding such concerns, Chinese newspapers establish their own programmes to assist the poor to continue their studies and they hold annual fund-raising programmes to channel donations to Chinese primary and independent schools throughout the country.
As for the Malays, the seeds of ethnocentrism were sown when Malay newspapers were published in the 1870s through to the 1900s. The Malay newspapers were used to foster the spirit of nationalism and also utilised as channels to speak out against attitudes that hindered the progress of the Malays. In fact, the development of the Malay political parties was made possible by the Malay press (Syed Arabi, 1989), the most notable among them being Utusan Melayu. In addition, the Tamil press also carried the plight of the Indians in the oil palm estates and other economic sectors, while championing Indian education, helping to spread literary works and functioning as the vehicle for political demands (Syed Arabi, 1989).

According to Halimahton et al. (2006), the development of the newspaper industry in Malaya could be summarised to two phases. The first phase (1806 until the late 1930s) saw the British traders and colonial officials pioneering the printing of English newspapers to satisfy the commercial needs of the British and the Europeans. A large part of the contents of these newspapers was commercial news and advertisements. The content of the Chinese and Indian newspapers then reflected the cultural, emotional and political attachment of the ethnic groups to their homelands. The Malay newspapers also mirrored the concerns of the community then – religion and, later, Malay nationalism. The second phase (1940s and towards Independence in 1957) witnessed a shift in the Chinese and Indian newspapers. When both ethnic groups realised that they were going to make Malaya their home, the newspapers, especially the Indian newspapers, campaigned to the readers to remain and become citizens of Malaya. This period saw newspapers further developing a stronger identification with their own ethnic communities.

The Malays, overwhelmed by the influx of the Indian and Chinese immigrants and realising that they could lose their control on the political and economic affairs of the country, began demonstrating these fears through anti-Chinese and anti-Indian sentiments in their newspapers (Mohd Yusof, 2003). 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 (Dahari, 1992).

Halimahton et al. (2006) claimed that the racial orientation of the newspapers today – where they cater mainly to readers of the same racial group – has not changed much from the colonial days. Despite the Malay language being the national language of Malaysia for almost 50 years, the content of most, if not all, Malay-language newspapers basically caters to the interests and needs of the Malay, not Malaysian, community. This is in part because of the politics of ethnicity, that is, divide and rule, that is being employed by most ethnic-based political parties in the country.

The exceptions are the English newspapers whose readership transcends racial groupings. The English newspapers are usually read by the elites and English-educated readers who are mostly concentrated in the urban areas. In addition, Lent (1990) also recognised that only the English newspapers are read by all racial groups and, therefore, alone served as an inter-ethnic medium.

**Theoretical framework**

This study drew upon framing as the theoretical framework. Framing is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterised in news reports can have an influence
on how it is understood by audience (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Scholars (Bosman & d’Haenens, 2008; McCombs, 2005) pointed out that the most frequently cited definition of framing comes from Entman (1993):

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)

Griffin (2003, p.156) regarded framing as ‘the process of calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, which might lead to different reactions’. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007, p. 11) described framing as ‘the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion in the media agenda when a particular object is discussed’. In addition, Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, and Ghanem (cited in Weaver, 2007) considered media frame as ‘the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration’.

Chong and Druckman (2007) found that communication scholars generally use the term ‘frame’ in two ways. First, a media frame refers to the words, images, phrases and presentation styles that a media outlet uses when relaying information about an issue or event to an audience. The chosen frame reveals what the media outlet sees as relevant to the topic at hand.

Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) regarded this way of framing as a macro level construct. They mentioned that the term ‘framing’ at a macro level construct refers to modes of presentation that journalists and other communicators use to present information in a way that resonates with existing underlying schemas among their audience. In fact, framing is a necessary tool for the journalists to reduce the complexity of an issue, given the constraints of their respective media related to news holes and airtime. Zillman, Chen, Knobloch, and Callison (2004) also recognised that framing is considered a pivotal practice in journalism. They noted that choosing a frame for a story would be the most consequential decision that journalists make.

As identified by Chong and Druckman (2007), a frame of thought or an individual frame is another way of how communication scholars use the word ‘frame’. It refers to an individual’s cognitive understanding of a given situation. Unlike media frame that reflects a media outlet’s emphasis, frames in thought refer to what an audience member believes to be the most salient aspect of an issue.

Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) considered this way of framing as a micro level construct, which describes how people use information and presentation features regarding issues as they form impressions. It is well documented that when news frame is used appropriately, they affect readers’ interest, attention, interpretation and comprehension of the news (see De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Iyengar & Simon, 1991; Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, and Vig, 2000; Zillman et al., 2004).

Framing analysis allows researchers to examine the roles of media in the development of social and political issues because it is common for competitions among political actors over an issue to turn into a rhetorical struggle to define the issue to their advantage (Song, 2007). When it comes to ideologically sensitive issues, Song (2007) found that the mainstream news media serve as an institution of social control by imposing frames that marginalise causes or movements that challenge the
values of the mainstream society. The most common frame used by mainstream news media in this way is one of ‘law and order’, which emphasises the violent and threatening nature of the movement under question. Alternative media, however, often serve as a communication outlet for movements and causes that are ignored or marginalised by the mainstream media.

According to Bramlett-Solomon (cited in Lasorsa, 2002), while ethnicity variables were often included in mass communication studies, few of them were theory based. By employing framing theory as the theoretical framework, this study is able to offer theoretical support for future research that is related to communication and ethnicity/language.

Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) regarded frame building as the macroscopic mechanism that deals with message construction. The activities of policy-makers, advertisers and other interest groups in shaping media agendas and frames can have impact on both the volume and character of news message about a particular issue. However, Carragee and Roefs (2004) noticed the neglect of power in recent framing research as it failed to examine framing processes within wider political and social context. Through investigating the framing of conflict on language in education by the Malaysian newspapers, this study is able to locate media frame within the wider political, social, economical and technological context.

Method

Content analysis was used as the research method for this study. The newspapers chosen were Utusan Malaysia, a daily in Bahasa Malaysia or the national language; The Star, an English language daily; Sin Chew Daily, a Chinese language daily and Malaysiakini, an alternative newspaper. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia, the 2010 average daily circulation of Utusan Malaysia, The Star and Sin Chew Daily was 164,764; 247,661 and 384,391, respectively (www.abcm.org.my). Utusan Malaysia is one of the top Malay newspapers in the country. More importantly, it has always been singled out for evoking racial tension between the Malays and non-Malays (Kua, 2010; Lee, 2010; Lim & Har, 2008). The Star and Sin Chew Daily enjoy the highest circulation within their respective language stream. These three mainstream dailies have a national circulation, although predominantly the circulation is within Peninsular Malaysia (Selva, 2010). Malaysiakini has also gone on to record average daily hits of approximately 200,000, which compares respectfully with the circulation of mainstream newspapers such as The Star and New Straits Times (Brown, 2005). Although Malaysiakini offers sections in English, Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Tamil, this study only focused on the English section because the other sections contain mainly translations of major English language stories.

The sample of this study was drawn from 1 July 2009 to 31 July 2009, as the time frame represented the peak period of the issue. This study used the census sample as scholars agree that a census often makes the most sense for research that examines a particular event or series of events (Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). The unit of analysis was articles of straight news, editorials, columns and letters. The articles were collected via database search, which were pulled from the respective newspaper’s online service by using ‘Teaching of Mathematics and Science in
English’ and ‘PPSMI’ as the key words. The sample consisted of 268 articles derived from the four newspapers.

Figure 1 represents the research framework of this study. The framing of the reversal of PPSMI policy was examined from four different dimensions: (1) extent of coverage, (2) news sources, (3) news topics and (4) slants of the articles.

The extent of coverage was studied from two angles: (1) number of articles and (2) type of articles. The categories for news sources were: (1) UMNO leaders; (2) MCA leaders; (3) MIC leaders; (4) Opposition leaders; (5) Malay nationalists; (6) Chinese educationists; (7) parents; (8) students; and (9) others.

Four categories of news topics were identified in this study: (1) reversing PPSMI; (2) retaining PPSMI; (3) expressing dissatisfaction and disappointment; and (4) defending Malay language. The following are the operational definitions for the news topics:

1. **Reversing PPSMI** – emphasised reasons to scrap PPSMI; reported research, findings and statistics that support teaching of Mathematics and Science in students’ mother tongue; presented the decision to reverse PPSMI as a mature decision; reported the Government’s steps in the implementation of the reversal.

2. **Retaining PPSMI** – emphasised reasons to retain PPSMI; stressed the importance of English as the international language of communication, trade, as well as scientific and technological research.

3. **Expressing dissatisfaction and disappointment** – presented the reversal of PPSMI as a shocking decision, a step backward, and a flip-flop decision; highlighted inefficiency of the Government; reported the reversal as a political motivated policy.

![Figure 1. Research framework of the study.](Asian Journal of Communication 459)
Defending Malay language – emphasised the importance of Malay language and its status; claimed PPSMI would destroy Malays’ unity; contended PPSMI would enhance the economy gap between the Malays and the non-Malays.

Slants of the articles refer to the attitude expressed towards the reversal of the PPSMI policy. This study used the categories of supportive, critical and neutral for the analysis of slants:

(1) Supportive – conveyed a favourable impression on the reversal of PPSMI policy or the Government. The coverage either supported or justified the reversal of the policy and contained quotes by individuals who approved of the reversal.

(2) Critical – conveyed an unfavourable impression on the reversal of PPSMI policy or the Government. It contained quotes by individuals who disapproved of the reversal.

(3) Neutral – neither portrayed the reversal of PPSMI policy or the Government favourably nor unfavourably. It also neither justified nor condemned the reversal of PPSMI policy or the Government.

Findings
The following are some basic information regarding the frequency and percentage of the variables suggesting the importance of conceptual differentiation between the four newspapers.

Extent of coverage
Sin Chew Daily published the most number of articles on the reversal of PPSMI policy (125 articles), followed by Utusan Malaysia (75 articles), The Star (46 articles) and Malaysiakini (22 articles). As indicated in Table 1, the majority of the articles from the three mainstream newspapers were straight news. In contrast, Malaysiakini had most of the articles in the form of letters. Sin Chew Daily carried the highest number of straight news (77.6%), followed by Utusan Malaysia (73.3%), The Star (63%) and Malaysiakini (22.7%). A finding of interest was that the four newspapers either devoted very little or no space for editorial on the issue. In addition, only Utusan Malaysia and Sin Chew Daily published column articles, which were 13.3%

Table 1. Types of articles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Utusan Malaysia (n = 75) %</th>
<th>The Star (n = 46) %</th>
<th>Sin Chew Daily (n = 125) %</th>
<th>Malaysiakini (n = 22) %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Straight news</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>77.6</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>77.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and 21.6%, respectively. *The Star* and *Utusan Malaysia* devoted 32.6% and 6.7% of their coverage to letters, respectively, while *Sin Chew Daily* had none.

### News sources

The results in Table 2 demonstrate that *Utusan Malaysia* (61.4%) depended heavily on UMNO leaders as its news source. The Malay nationalists were the next predominant source (17.3%), followed by others (9.3%) and parents (6.7%). Students, leaders from MCA, MIC and opposition parties were also attributed as news sources, where each made up 1.3% respectively.

Similarly, *The Star* also relied most heavily on UMNO leaders (50%) as its source, followed by parents (19.6%), MCA leaders (6.5%) and opposition leaders (6.5%). The Chinese educationists, students and others made up 4.4%, respectively, while the MIC leaders and Malay nationalists made up 2.2% respectively.

While UMNO leaders (32%) continued to be the most important news source for *Sin Chew Daily*, the Chinese educationists (24%) were attributed as a predominant source too. *Sin Chew Daily* also gave voice to MCA leaders (15.2%), others (9.6%), opposition leaders (8%), parents (7.2%), MIC leaders (1.6%), Malay nationalists (1.6%) and students (0.8%).

The most important news source for *Malaysiakini* was others (36.4%), followed by parents (27.3%), UMNO leaders (18.2%), opposition leaders (9.1%), MCA leaders (4.6%) and MIC leaders (4.6%).

It is noteworthy that reactions from the Indian community were rather muted and students who are greatly affected by the policy were rarely consulted for their perspectives by the four newspapers, regardless of mainstream or alternative.

### News topics

#### Utusan Malaysia

Among the four newspapers, *Utusan Malaysia* (64%) devoted the most coverage on the topic of reversing PPSMI (see Table 3). It reported that the reversal in policy was due to objective considerations that were based on empirical studies and other specialist reviews. It also emphasised that the reversal was not due to political

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**Table 2. News sources.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Source</th>
<th>Utusan Malaysia (n=75) %</th>
<th>The Star (n=46) %</th>
<th>Sin Chew Daily (n=125) %</th>
<th>Malaysiakini (n=22) %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UMNO</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCA</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIC</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay nationalists</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese educationists</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reasons. *Utusan Malaysia* mainly cited the reasons to scrap PPSMI as stated by the Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who is also the Education Minister. It mentioned that the Government found only a small percentage of teachers who fully used English to teach Mathematics and Science. In addition to PPSMI being not effective in improving students’ mastery of English, the proficiency of Malaysian students in the two subjects has also been on a steady decline (Noraini, 2009).

Muhyiddin also mentioned that UNESCO’s findings showed that students could learn Mathematics and Science better in their mother tongue. One of the articles published in *Utusan Malaysia* even stated that countries such as Japan, France, Korea and Germany achieved the status of advanced countries by using their mother tongue. Mathematics and Science were not taught in English in those countries but they were still able to create their own history (Noraini, 2009).

By focusing on the topic of reversing PPSMI policy, *Utusan Malaysia* emphasised that the Government wants to have a 'soft landing'; therefore, the reversal will only begin in 2012. It reported that this will allow the Government time to make necessary preparations like recruitment of the number of teachers needed and to introduce new co-curriculum books. In addition, it was also reported that the abolishment of PPSMI policy will save the Government RM40 million per year. This is because the Government does not need to provide incentive to teachers who are teaching Mathematics and Science in English (Almost RM5b, 2009).

*Utusan Malaysia* also mentioned that the rural students have been suffering under PPSMI as many of them do not understand English. The Head of The Federation of National Writers Associations of Malaysia (GAPENA), Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dr Ismail Hussein said that PPSMI only benefited the urbanites while the rural students continued to be under pressure to the extent of causing a big gap among the Malays. He worried that if PPSMI continues; the urbanities who are actually the minority will become the majority and control everything. If that happens, the country will be chaotic because mother tongue is not upheld and foreign language is given great priority instead (Azman, 2009).

The second concern of *Utusan Malaysia* was about defending the Malay language (18.7%). The newspaper reported that voices objecting PPSMI brought up the Constitution, Razak Report and National Language Act 1967, which stated Bahasa Melayu as the formal language in education. For the Malay nationalists, PPSMI was a threat to their Malay-ness since it downgrades the use of the national language (Azman, 2009).

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Table 3. News topics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Utusan Malaysia (n = 75) %</th>
<th>The Star (n = 46) %</th>
<th>Sin Chew Daily (n = 125) %</th>
<th>Malaysia-kini (n = 22) %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reversing PPSMI</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retaining PPSMI</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing dissatisfaction and disappointment</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>77.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defending Malay language</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There was 6.7% of Utusan Malaysia’s coverage that expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment towards the reversal of PPSMI policy. For example, it reported that the Dean of Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences from University of Malaya, Professor Datuk Zainal Kling claimed that the economic value of Bahasa Malaysia is being lowered by delaying the abolishment of PPSMI to 2012 (Luqman, Arif, & Mohamad Shofi, 2009).

Only 2.7% of Utusan Malaysia’s coverage focused on retaining the PPSMI policy. It reported that 26,000 respondents provided feedback to Mahathir’s blog and 80% disagreed with the decision to revert to Bahasa Malaysia (Dr M, 2009). In addition, the Parent Action Group for Education (PAGE) distributed 3000 questionnaires to schools throughout the country and 95% wanted PPSMI to be retained (PAGE shocked, 2009).

The Star
The Star also paid special attention to the news topic on reversing PPSMI (52.2%). It pronounced and explained the government’s policy and emphasised the Education Ministry’s strategy of ‘Upholding Bahasa Malaysia, Strengthening English’. The Star reported that the Government would place more emphasis on English, which include the hiring of retired teachers; hiring of assistant teachers for bigger classes; having additional periods for English; implementing laboratories for the learning of English in schools; introducing a Contemporary English Literature Programme for children; having English Day at school and summer camp during the holidays.

The Star was also concerned with the dissatisfaction and disappointment towards the reversal of PPSMI policy (41.3%). It reported that the reversal was a shocking decision, a step backward, a flip-flop decision and demonstrated the inefficiency of the Government. The Star stated that the students involved in the PPSMI for the past six years have become guinea pigs, and the reversal will confuse the students who have been learning the two subjects in English (Liong, 2009). It also reported that the competitiveness and future of schoolchildren will be compromised with the abolishment of PPSMI (A let-down, 2009).

Besides, The Star also reported that the reversal of PPSMI has been politically motivated, with an eye on the next general election. It was published that the decision to revert looked like a political one because Muhyiddin met with GMP (Movement for the Abolition of PPSMI), the Malay literature writers and religious scholars, but not the professional technical people (Gunasegaram, 2009).

The Star only gave 6.5% of its coverage on retaining PPSMI. It mentioned that English is the international language of communication, trade, as well as scientific and technological research. Moreover, most of the reference books, journals and material for Mathematics and Science are in English. Therefore, teaching the two subjects in English would help broaden students’ knowledge of new terminologies and improve their command of the language (Poobalan, 2009).

It has also been reported that Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) executive director, Shamsuddin Bardan is of the view that PPSMI should have been allowed to continue for at least 15 years before a decision is made. He said it was too early to gauge the effectiveness of the policy. In an MEF survey conducted in 1999 among its members, 43.6% of the respondents said they had staff with problems in written and communication skills. In 2003, MEF did another survey, which indicated that the
problem had increased, with 54% with the same complains. He also added that most graduates lacked the ability to converse in English (Mixed views on policy, 2009).

**Sin Chew Daily**

In *Sin Chew Daily*, the topic on reversing PPSMI was given more coverage than the rest of the topics (36.8%). It reported the reasons given by Muhyiddin and other UMNO leaders on the plan to scrap PPSMI. It also relayed the assurance from the Government that more emphasis will be given to English although PPSMI will be abolished.

Much attention was also given by *Sin Chew Daily* to the topic on expressing dissatisfaction and disappointment (32.8%). It criticised PPSMI as a hasty, under-consulted and ill-designed policy. It claimed that the Government was not ready to implement PPSMI from the very beginning and had wasted much of the tax payers' money. It also stated that PPSMI should be abolished immediately rather than delaying it to 2012.

By pursuing the topic on dissatisfaction and disappointment, *Sin Chew Daily* criticised the Government’s hidden agenda behind the reversal of PPSMI. It reported that the reversal satisfied the Malay nationalists, who are the elites in the Malay community and also UMNO supporters. According to *Sin Chew Daily*, Mahathir’s implementation of PPSMI prompted a quick backlash from the Malay nationalists, and created deviation where Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and People’s Justice Party (PKR) took the opportunity to win over their support. Although PPSMI is an education issue, it has nevertheless become a political one. *Sin Chew Daily* stated that UMNO cannot afford to let its traditional supporters turn to the opposition, therefore had to give in to their demand in regard to the PPSMI issue (Zheng, 2009).

In addition, *Sin Chew Daily* criticised the Civil Service Act 1993, which stated that civil educators are prohibited from taking part in political activities or publishing anything that would damage national unity. Although the reversal of PPSMI unleashed a storm of disputes amongst the people, the teachers who were affected the most have been keeping quiet due to the Civil Service Act 1993. *Sin Chew Daily* reported that in the long run, the drafting of education policies will not include the education experts, but only involve the politicians who will use it for their political mileage (Chen, 2009).

*Sin Chew Daily* devoted 21.6% of its coverage on the topic of retaining PPSMI. It reflected most parents’ wish that PPSMI will be reversed at primary level but retained at secondary level. The parents felt that perpetuating the use of Malay as the medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science was unreasonable. Children who have to struggle to learn the two subjects in Malay would have to relearn them in English upon entering university. There was no added value in learning the subjects in Malay, especially when reading and referencing are done mainly in English. Parents also felt that students should not be disadvantaged in acquiring information from the Internet, especially on science studies, reports and conference proceedings, which are mostly in English (After PPSMI reversal, 2009). A finding of interest was that the request from parents to retain PPSMI at secondary level was not reported at all in the other three newspapers.

Only 2.4% of its coverage was devoted by *Sin Chew Daily* to the topic of defending Malay language. According to *Sin Chew Daily*, Royal Professor Ungku Aziz
mentioned that the scrapping of PPSMI is good for the development of Bahasa Malaysia in the country. He hoped that the Government will give more emphasis to the use of Bahasa Malaysia as a language for unity in the country (Muhyiddin, 2009).

Malaysiakini

*Malaysiakini* differed sharply from the other three newspapers, where its main concern was on expressing dissatisfaction and disappointment (77.3%). It reported that the reversal reflected an attitude that does not take the developmental needs of children seriously. *Malaysiakini* criticised that every time a new education minister is appointed, a new education policy appears because he wants to make a mark in the book of records (Wong, 2009). In addition, it reported that the switchover was politically motivated, which has something to do with the July 2009 by-elections in Kelantan and expected snap general election in 2012 (The math, 2009).

*Malaysiakini* also reported that the Government need to take in views expressed by education stakeholders, for example, parents, teachers and educationists. There should be a consistency in outlining the education policies of the country that match the modern requirements of the society. The wave-like changes in the education policies will only weaken the education system in the long run (Lee, 2009).

By covering the topic on retaining PPSMI (13.6%), *Malaysiakini* reported that bilingualism will be advantageous to the children, as they learn additional languages to become globally competitive. Learning an additional language will not make the children lose their national identity, less patriotic or less nationalistic. On the contrary, it will open doors of opportunity and lead to racial unity (Gadfly, 2009).

*Malaysiakini* only devoted 9.1% of its coverage on the topic of reversing PPSMI. It quoted the reasons to scrap PPSMI as given by the UMNO leaders.

**Slant**

According to Table 4, the reversal of PPSMI received the most supportive coverage from *Utusan Malaysia* (86.7%) as compared to *Sin Chew Daily* (36.8%), *The Star* (32.6%) and *Malaysiakini* (4.6%). By adopting the supportive slant, the coverage conveyed a favourable impression on the reversal of PPSMI policy or the Government. The coverage either supported or justified the reversal of the policy and contained quotes by individuals who approved of the reversal. For example, it was reported in *Utusan Malaysia* that the Vice President of UMNO, Shafie Apdal mentioned that the decision to scrap PPSMI reflected the government’s concern to implement the idea of Malaysia, which is ‘People First, Performance Now’ (Abdul Rashid, 2009).

**Table 4. Slant.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><em>Utusan Malaysia</em> (n = 75) %</th>
<th><em>The Star</em> (n = 46) %</th>
<th><em>Sin Chew Daily</em> (n = 125) %</th>
<th><em>Malaysiakini</em> (n = 22) %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>90.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There was a sharp contrast in the percentage of critical slants among the four newspapers. The most critical slant came from *Malaysiakini* (90.1%), followed by *Sin Chew Daily* (47.2%), *The Star* (33.3%) and *Utusan Malaysia* (9.3%). The critical coverage conveyed an unfavourable impression on the reversal of PPSMI policy or the Government. It contained quotes by individuals who disapproved of the reversal. For example, it was reported in *Malaysiakini* that while the Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak may be enjoying a high popularity rating while he celebrated 100 days in office, his well-known supporter and former Prime Minister Mahathir brought the celebratory mood down with an unfavourable assessment. Mahathir said that the government’s move to scrap PPSMI contributed to Najib’s negative image (Rahmah, 2009).

Among the four newspapers, *The Star* appeared to be the most neutral (34.1%), followed by *Sin Chew Daily* (16%), *Malaysiakini* (4.6%) and *Utusan Malaysia* (4%). By being neutral, the coverage neither portrayed the reversal of PPSMI policy or the Government favourably nor unfavourably. It also neither justified nor condemned the reversal of PPSMI policy or the Government.

**Discussion**

The difference in the number of articles published by the four newspapers indicated that they carried unequal weight of attention to the reversal of PPSMI policy. The findings demonstrated that *Sin Chew Daily* was most concerned with the issue, followed by *Utusan Malaysia*, *The Star* and *Malaysiakini*.

As written by Collins (2006), language is one of the basic components of culture and a vital element of ethnic identity. Language and education are two indispensable instruments for sustaining one’s culture. In Malaysia, the Chinese newspapers have always beenshouldering the mission to safeguard Chinese culture and identity. Furthermore, the Chinese community is worried that PPSMI represented yet another attempt by the Malay-dominated coalition government to undermine the use of Mandarin in Malaysia’s national education system. Therefore, it is only natural that *Sin Chew Daily* gave the most attention to the reversal of PPSMI policy as compared to the other three newspapers.

Readers depend very heavily on the type of materials made available through the newspapers; the relative prominence given to different types of material and the way it is handled in order to evaluate an issue (McCombs, 2004). By devoting most of their articles to the monotonous coverage of Government directives and speeches, the three mainstream newspapers mainly performed surveillance instead of interpretation function of the media. Van Dijk (1988) also remarked that when straight news dominated the coverage, it left little room for the creativeness of journalists, resulting in a top-down communication format. Although a few letters were published in *Utusan Malaysia*, they were mainly supportive of the reversal of PPSMI policy. Such letters only reinforced the pro-reversal straight news reports that appeared on the day concerned. Furthermore, an array of such letters could give the impression that a large majority of Malaysians supported the reversal.

In sharp contrast to the mainstream newspapers, *Malaysiakini* devoted most of its coverage to the letters, which means that its readers were exposed to different opinions and comments, which were essential to be considered in order to evaluate the issue. Shamsul (2005) emphasised that the bottom-up collective expression of
various groups at the grassroots can help to redefine and refine many aspects that sometimes escape the attention of the people in power. With little focus on ordinary people, and without finding out whether their position as stated by the elites is reflective of the true feelings on the ground, there is little that journalists can do to empower the ordinary people.

Moreover, letters are known as an ‘enduring forum for public debate’ by Wahl-Jorgensen (2002), while Jha (2008) recognised that letters allow citizens to communicate with one another, and even to act together. In his discussion of the alternative media, Atkinson (2008) mentioned that interactivity has been described as a reaction on the part of a receiver to earlier transmissions from a sender, and it has been understood as audience engagement with stimulating qualities of texts. He added that true interactivity can only occur when audience are able to co-create media content alongside producers. The letters published in Malaysiakini thus reflected a higher level of interactivity between the readers and the alternative newspaper than those in the mainstream newspapers.

Fahmy (2005) suggested that the source of news stories determine the basic nature of the stories and influence the flow of information through the media. Entman (1993) even argued that to some extent, source is the story. This study found that there was a remarkable consistency across the three mainstream newspapers that used UMNO leaders as the major news source. This showed that the mainstream newspapers allowed the dominant political party in the country to act as opinion leader in defining the reversal of the PPSMI policy. Since public officials tend to speak a universalising and rationalising language, the heavy reliance on public official as news sources tend to legitimise the state and its policy.

There is a Malay proverb that says ‘language is the soul of ethnicity’ (bahasa jiwa bangsa). As a Malay language newspaper, Utusan Malaysia indeed relied more on Malay nationalists as its news source with regard to the reversal of PPSMI policy. As a Chinese language newspaper, Sin Chew Daily also depended on Chinese educationists as its source, and most of them came from the Dong Jiao Zong, which often acts as a pressure group to defend Mandarin-medium education.

Framing analysis of the news topics in Utusan Malaysia revealed that the newspaper was mostly in line with the government’s stance. It represented the ‘ideal’ view of the Government, where negative topics were downplayed. This finding resonated with Wong’s (2004) study, which stated that the mainstream media in Malaysia is expected to mobilise the masses to accept new ideas without creating cultural and ethnic tensions as well as psychological frustrations and anxieties. Furthermore, Utusan Malaysia’s inclination towards supporting the PPSMI reversal can be attributed to the fact that it is an UMNO-owned daily, and, therefore, it has the inclination to serve the vested interests of its owner. From here, it is also tempted to argue that the editors and journalists were also influenced, directly or indirectly, by external forces such as UMNO, Malay nationalists, etc.

Although The Star and Sin Chew Daily also focused much on the topic of reversing PPSMI, they were relatively fairer than Utusan Malaysia as they gave more coverage on the topic of expressing dissatisfaction and disappointment. Those that opposed the reversal of PPSMI were mostly the English-speaking parents. As the English newspaper with the highest circulation in Malaysia, The Star definitely needed to report the reaction of this group. Due to the relatively independent
ownership enjoyed by *Sin Chew Daily*, the Chinese newspaper also reflected the most criticism towards the Government over the PPSMI issue.

Among the Chinese community in Malaysia, there is a strong belief that in order for Chinese culture to survive and flourish, Chinese schools are essential as the transmitter of Chinese culture to the next generation. The fundamental assumption is that the medium of instruction has a direct correlation with cultural transmission and, by extension, the preservation of ethnic uniqueness including values, institutions and symbols. Furthermore, apprehension exists among the Chinese community that the Government is deliberately seeking to hinder replication of the country’s minority Chinese identity by changing the medium of instruction in vernacular primary schools. Therefore, it explained the reason why *Sin Chew Daily* devoted the most attention to the reversal of PPSMI and requested for the policy to be abolished immediately at the primary level.

As compared to the mainstream newspapers, *Malaysiakini* painted a rather different picture by highlighting dissatisfaction and disappointment in its news topic. This finding was in accordance with the results of the research conducted by Steele (2009), who described *Malaysiakini* as ‘aggressively pursuing the bottom line without opposing the government’.

In the specifics of Malaysian political culture, where the Government has de facto control of the press and laws preventing journalists from reporting on sensitive issues as ethnicity and religion, *Malaysiakini* has always been singled out for its independence and gustiness. At a time when mainstream media has lost credibility for their pro-government stance, *Malaysiakini* gained immediate attention and international accolades for its independent reporting. As Anwar Ibrahim said in a 2007 interview, ‘*Malaysiakini* has independence, credibility. It’s the only avenue we have; the other media have an instruction to block us out’ (Steele, 2009). In addition, despite his long-standing aversion to *Malaysiakini*, Mahathir turned to the alternative newspaper to publish his opinions and concerns in May 2006, contributing critiques of his successor, Abdullah Badawi’s actions and policies. It was also ironic that Mahathir complained that the mainstream media have unfairly denied him the space to express his views and accused Abdullah’s administration of obstructing press freedom.

It was noteworthy that all the newspapers except for *Utusan Malaysia*, reported that the reversal of PPSMI has been politically motivated. Tollefson and Tsui (2004) highlighted that decisions on choice of language in education should be examined in greater depth:

Policy makers put forward an educational agenda that justifies policy decisions regarding the use and/or the prohibition of a particular language or languages. Yet, behind the educational agenda are political, social and economic agendas that serve to protect the interests of particular political and social groups. The tension between these agendas is difficult to resolve, and almost invariably leads to the triumph of the political, social or economic agenda over the educational agenda. For this reason, we feel that it is important, when examining medium-of-instruction policy issues, to ask and address the questions, ‘Which Agenda? Whose Agenda?’ (p. 2)

The differences found in the slant of the articles reflected the different roles of the newspapers too. *Utusan Malaysia* is merely a mouthpiece of the Government, *Sin Chew Daily* is a defender of Chinese culture and identity, *Malaysiakini* acted more like a watchdog while *The Star* had been neutral pertaining to the reversal of PPSMI issue.
Conclusion

In making news, journalists shape a reality that reflects the political economic and ideological boundaries within which they work. This study examined what pictures newspapers have created for citizens' understanding of the reversal of PPSMI policy. It was found that the mainstream newspapers framed the issue in similar ways to support the status quo, while the alternative newspaper reflected what was mostly left out in its counter-hegemonic discourse. Framing reflects a conflict between dominant social norms and efforts for change. Thus, Durham (2007) argued that framing constitutes bias, a deviation from objectivity. Martin and Oshagen (cited in Durham, 2007) suggested that when framing becomes a hegemonic process, it limits the range of debate in the news media and occludes the potential for a democratic sphere. In this sense, media frames represent artefacts of powerful ideological processes.

As for future research, in order to investigate the impact of news frames on people's perception of an issue, it would be interesting to juxtapose the findings of this study with public opinion data to measure public perceptions towards the reversal of PPSMI policy.

Notes on contributors

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