



**MEDIA FRAMING REPORTS ON MALAYSIA'S ANTI-FAKE NEWS  
LAW**

By

WAN, CHEN

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in  
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science**

**December 2022**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

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**December 2022**

**Chair : Assoc. Prof. Moniza Waheed, PhD**  
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Malaysia is a democratic country that has practised Development Journalism since it gained independence from the British. The main concept of Development Journalism aims to serve the Malaysian government by promoting policies of national development on mass media. However, the freedom of media is monitored by the Malaysian government through several laws with overlapping legal provisions to regulate fake news dissemination. A more robust Anti-Fake News Law was introduced right before the 14th general election in 2018 to combat fake news. This law was disapproved by the public and media practitioners because of the severe encroachment on the rights of free speech and reporting. Thus, the main objective of this study is to investigate how Malaysian journalists frame their news reports on the Anti-Fake News Law. Framing theory differentiates the new frames as issue-specific frames and generic frames. This study used generic frames in content analysis to identify the differences between serious newspapers and tabloids. The serious newspapers include Bernama and New Straits Times, and the tabloids include The Sun and The Malay Mail. There was a total of 212 news reports from four newspapers retrieved from LexisNexis. Results show that the conflict frame was the most prevalent in the news reports covering Anti-Fake News Law, and the negative tone was the most frequently used compared to others. The results suggested that serious newspapers were found to use attribution of responsibility frames more frequently compared to tabloids, which tended to use human interest frames more frequently. The study also found that the attribution of responsibility frame was more susceptible to the positive tone whereas the conflict frame was more susceptible to the negative tone. In conclusion, Malaysia's journalistic role performance was interfered with by the government's agenda of national building, journalists tended to report political issues by using a more negative narrative against the practice of Development Journalism.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Sarjana Sains

## LAPORAN PENYIARAN MEDIA TENDANG UNDANG-UNDANG ANTI-BERITA PALSU DI MALAYSIA

Oleh

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Malaysia adalah sebuah negara demokratik yang telah mengamalkan Jurnalisme Pembangunan sejak merdeka dari British. Konsep utama Jurnalisme Pembangunan bertujuan untuk melayani kerajaan Malaysia dengan mempromosikan dasar-dasar pembangunan kebangsaan melalui media massa. Namun, kebebasan media dikawal oleh kerajaan Malaysia melalui beberapa undang-undang yang mempunyai peruntukan undang-undang yang tumpang tindih untuk mengawal penyebaran berita palsu. Satu undang-undang Anti-Berita Palsu yang lebih kukuh diperkenalkan tepat sebelum pilihan raya umum ke-14 pada tahun 2018 untuk memerangi berita palsu. Undang-undang ini ditentang oleh orang ramai dan para pengamal media kerana ia melanggar hak kebebasan bersuara dan melaporkan. Oleh itu, objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk menyiasat bagaimana wartawan Malaysia membingkai laporan berita mereka mengenai undang-undang Anti-Berita Palsu. Teori Bingkai membezakan bingkai baru sebagai bingkai isu khusus dan bingkai generik. Kajian ini menggunakan bingkai generik dalam analisis kandungan untuk mengenal pasti perbezaan antara akhbar serius dan akhbar tawar. Akhbar serius termasuk Bernama dan New Straits Times, manakala akhbar tawar termasuk The Sun dan The Malay Mail. Terdapat sejumlah 212 laporan berita dari empat portal berita yang diperolehi dari LexisNexis. Keputusan menunjukkan bingkai konflik adalah yang paling dominan dalam laporan berita yang meliputi Undang-Undang Anti-Berita Palsu, dan nada negatif paling kerap digunakan berbanding yang lain. Keputusan kajian menunjukkan akhbar serius cenderung menggunakan bingkai atribusi tanggungjawab lebih kerap berbanding akhbar tawar yang cenderung menggunakan bingkai minat manusia lebih kerap. Kajian ini juga mendapati bingkai atribusi tanggungjawab lebih mudah dipengaruhi oleh nada positif manakala bingkai konflik lebih mudah dipengaruhi oleh nada negatif. Kesimpulannya, peranan wartawan Malaysia telah terganggu oleh agenda pembinaan negara oleh kerajaan, dan wartawan cenderung melaporkan isu politik dengan menggunakan naratif yang lebih negatif terhadap amalan Jurnalisme Pembangunan.

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BN	Barisan Nasional
MAC	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCMC	Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission
MIC	Malaysian Indians Congress
OSA	Official Secret Act
PH	Pakatan Harapan
PPPA	Printing Press and Publications Act
UMNO	United Malays National Organization

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of Study

A Danish citizen named Salah Salem Saleh Sulaiman became the first person to be prosecuted under the new Malaysian Anti-Fake News Law because of inaccurate criticism of police on social media (“Danish national”, 2018). This breaking news made Malaysia draw numerous attention worldwide and raise curiosity about this Asian country.

Malaysia is a country situated in Southeast Asia with a long history of colonization. After gaining independence from the British, Malaysia decided to practice the political system named Parliamentary Democracy with Constitutional Monarchy (The Parliament of Malaysia, 2019) based on its unique culture and historical background. Under this political system, Malaysia stepped into the democratic path and has functioned as such since that time. In general, the parliament plays an essential role in the system and decides the direction of this country. Every associated bill or act needs to go through Dewan Rakyat (the lower house) first, and then pass by Dewan Negara (the upper house) to make its stand.

On 4th, February 2018, Dewan Rakyat passed the Anti-Fake News law and made it official the same year on the 11th of April because the law needs the major votes in Dewan Negara, and the approval was made right before the 14th general elections. This Anti-Fake News Law aimed to combat fake news that took place in Malaysia without any discrimination between foreigners and Malaysians and gave a prison sentence of six years and a maximum fine of RM 500,000 (“Malaysia finally”, 2019). However, this law is not only concerned with the public’s behaviour of separating fake news or information; the media practitioners and their organizations are also a target.

In Malaysia, most media organizations are owned by the government or under its control (Kasim & Sani, 2016); the existence of independent news portals, such as Malaysiakini, is rare. The formation of the media system in the country is based on the practice of Development Journalism, which is in line to enforce the government’s power and serve nation-building (Waheed & Hellmueller, 2021). The Malaysian government established the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) to monitor the practices of all mass media and issue annual permits for publishing news (Ismail, 2013).

Apart from the regulations under MCMC, different acts were passed to set boundaries for media organizations and the public to avoid the occurrence of offensive actions, such as the Printing Press and Publications Act (PPPA), the Sedition Act, and the Official

Secret Act (OSA), and more recently, the passing of Anti-Fake News Law. The Anti-Fake News Law raised concerns about media and the public's right to free speech, especially during the 14th general election.

This is because a party named Barisan Nasional (BN) has run the country since its independence, and the people have desired changes. At the same time, the opposition party Pakatan Harapan (PH) promised the public that this new law will be repealed once it won the election. However, with victory in the elections, PH was unable to keep the promise they made to the people; the very people who supported and voted for them.

In August 2018, the proposal of repealing the Anti-Fake News Law was passed by Dewan Rakyat, but it was rejected by Dewan Negara because of fewer votes in September (Anis & Kaos, 2019). Until December 2019, Dewan Negara finally repealed this law after a one-year cooling-off period ("Malaysia finally", 2019), but it is still hard for both public and media practitioners to practice their free speech rights without concerns during the time that this law was in practice, even though the human rights were stated clearly in Article 19 in the document named Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which states that everyone has the right to free speech and to express their ideas or opinions without any reprisals from others or the authorities, and they also have the right to seek or receive information that they are concerned with.

## **1.2 Statement of Research Problem**

Malaysia was declared a democratic country when it gained independence from the British in 1957, and yet, with the standing of three different laws to regulate and monitor mass media, the government still passed Anti-Fake News Law to restrict its rights to practise free speech based on the value and culture of journalism. This new law makes Malaysia becomes one of the few countries that passed a law to combat fake news.

Fake news is designed to display counterfeit and inaccurate information consciously as news (Gelfert, 2018). It has been identified as a growing threat that challenges societal values and damages the quality of democracies by weaponizing the term to discredit journalists' reporting (Neo, 2020). Enforcing a new Anti-Fake News Law may not be able to resolve the problems caused by fake news but increase other problems such as the criticism of press freedom and free speech. In addition, this law overlaps with other exits laws such as The Printing Press and Publication Acts, causing confusion among the public, restricting and jeopardizing Malaysian's right to free speech and the media's freedom of reporting. In 2018, Malaysia ranked 145 out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index, and in 2019, Free Malaysia Today still identifies Malaysia as a "flawed democracy". Mass media practitioners are unable to practice their professional roles and construct news based on journalistic values and norms.

News frames are an essential part of journalists' news reporting, which refers to the theoretical mechanisms used by media and human beings to transmit, portray and appraise information (Neuman et al, 1992). Studies found that news frames are highly associated with the public and society because they affect citizens' opinions, attitudes, and behaviour towards certain issues (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2016). News frames may direct the public's attention to a certain aspect, change their attitudes or opinions toward a specific issue, or even sway the voting decision.

The passing of the Anti-Fake News Law and other laws worsen journalists' freedom and autonomy of using news frames to describe political issues, which affect the public's judgments and strengthen the power of government, destroying the spirit of democracy. The mass media becomes the medium of governments' propaganda, and the public loses their right of being aware of the status quo in the country.

News frames not only have practical influence but also play an important role in the academic area; Framing becomes one of the research fields that have drawn attention to political communication. Framing "involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue" (De Vreese, 2005). Framing theory is mostly developed in western countries (Lecheler et al., 2015; Kim & Wanta, 2018), with less research or development being done in Malaysia (Khang et al., 2012; Zawawi et al., 2014). This study focuses on the development of framing theory in the Malaysian context and filling in the knowledge gap between western countries and Malaysia, guaranteeing the theory itself is well-developed in both western countries and Malaysia.

Moreover, from the literature perspective, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) stated that the past literature focuses more on providing a clear explanation of frames and framing effects, and most of the framing studies could be identified in two directions: frame building and frame setting (De Vreese, 2005); frame building focusses more on the use of frames whereas framing setting centers on frame effects.

As stated, previous studies target more on investigating certain frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; De Vreese et al., 2001; De Vreese, 2005), while less focus on investigating the tone attached to the frame (Schunk & De Vreese, 2006), and the tone as the valence of the frames brings important effects to viewers. It is necessary to explore the relationship between news frames and the tone to get an insight into the nature of frames. More important, identifying the tone with the frames can provide more literature for future study and extend the possibility of different research topics in the framing field.

### **1.3 Research Question**

The main research question is to what extent do the frames employed for reports covering the Anti-Fake News Law differ from serious newspapers and tabloids?

Following the main research questions, the attending specific research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What frame is most prevalent in the reports covering the Anti-Fake News Law?

RQ2: What is the most prevalent tone present in the reports covering the Anti-Fake News Law?

RQ3: What are the differences between serious newspapers and tabloids in terms of the frames employed for reports covering the Anti Fake News Law?

RQ4: What is the relationship between the five generic frames and tone?

#### **1.4 Research Objective**

With the research questions posed, the main research objective is to investigate the extent to which serious newspapers and tabloids are different in terms of the frames employed for reports covering the Anti-Fake News Law.

Following the main research objective and parallel with each proposed research question, the attending specific research objectives are proposed:

RO1: To identify which frame is most prevalent in the reports covering the Anti-Fake News Law.

RO2: To analyse the most prevalent tone present in the reports covering the Anti-Fake News Law.

RO3: To explore the differences between serious newspapers and tabloids in terms of the frames employed for reports covering the Anti Fake News Law

RO4: To investigate the relationship between five generic frames and tone.

#### **1.5 Significance of Study**

The enactment of the Anti-Fake News Law has created more obstacles for Malaysians to practice their rights in a democratic country, where the status quo of democracy ranks much lower compared with other democratic countries. The practice of journalism is also in a difficult position, in which the government restricts the freedom and autonomy of journalists to construct news, preventing them from fulfilling their duties to inform and deliver the truth to the public.



The news frames are not only schemas for journalists to write news, but also powerful tools that help people to gain understanding and make sense of different things such as public policy, and affect citizen's opinions, attitudes, and behaviour towards certain issues (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2016).

This study focuses on the frames applied by the journalists in the news reports, to understand the structure of news reports and inform the public as to what the things are that affect their thoughts, improve their awareness of the information that they receive, and help make rational decisions. Moreover, this study provides a picture of journalists' practice in the country under numerous confusing regulations and calls for reasonable changes for journalists to practice their professional role in this democratic country.

Framing is one of the more popular theories in political communication, and many scholars have contributed to the theory building, such as Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), and Lecheler and De Vreese (2016). However, most of the studies were conducted in western countries and there is an obvious gap in Asia countries, such as Malaysia. No evidence suggests that the western-built theory could not be adjusted for the different cultures and political systems in Malaysia. Hence, this study provides empirical evidence for theory building in the Asia context, easing the gap between western and Asia and generalizing the theory from more perspectives.

Moreover, this study tries to investigate the relationship between news frames and tone. Previous studies focus more on certain frames, such as media frames (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Scheufele, 1999), audience frames (Entman, 1991; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), issue-specific frames, and generic frames (De Vreese, 2005), but fewer studies focus on the tone attached within the frame.

Identifying the tone explores the nature of the news frame, it gives a better understanding of how the news frame affects the public's opinions, attitudes, and behaviours toward certain issues. It is also a new exploration of a research method in the framing field and suggests a new direction for future research. This study encourages other scholars to seek different research methods in framing theory to get a complete map of framing.

## **1.6 Scope of Study**

The scope of the study chooses to investigate 5 generic frames among other frames. The difference between the generic frame and the issue-specific frame can be identified through both inductive and deductive analysis. The inductive approach explores the different possibilities of frames applied in the news without being predefined, but this method is normally based on a small sample and is hard to duplicate.

The deductive approach uses predefined frames that other researchers have already used and have been applied to different studies. It is easy to replicate and can be used in a large sample, but this method requires that researchers have a clear mind to ensure that the frame is applied within its context. This study requires a large sample to find the trend of using news frames in the reports covering Anti-Fake News Law, hence, the five generic frames match and fit the focus of this study.

This study selects four English-language online newspapers including *Bernama*, *The Malay Mail*, *New Straits Times*, and *The Sun*. *Bernama* is a prominent news agency that covers inclusive news updates and subscriptions service in Malaysia (Mohamed & Khalib, 2006). *The Malay Mail* provides local and international news on its website. *New Straits Times* is the oldest newspaper in Malaysia and recorded 14,000,000 page views for digital news in 2019 (New Straits Times, n.d.). *The Sun* is one of the highest-circulation English-language newspapers in the country compared with other newspapers (Cheong et al., 2016). To investigate the different applications of generic frames, *Bernama* and *New Straits Times* were identified as serious newspapers whereas *The Malay Mail* and *The Sun* were identified as tabloids.

### **1.7 Definition of Key Items**

**Fake news-** Designed to display counterfeit and inaccurate information consciously as news (Gelfert, 2018).

**News frames-** The theoretical mechanisms used by media and human beings to transmit, portray and appraise information (Neuman et al, 1992).

**Development Journalism-** To promote the policies that fit the government's agenda and boost social and economic development (Waheed & Hellmueller, 2021).

**Journalistic Role Performance-** The aggregate result of solid newsroom decisions and approaches to journalistic reporting (Mellado et al., 2017a)

**Serious newspaper-** Refers to broadsheet newspapers offering more in-depth and serious news topics that attract middle-class readers (Hilton et al., 2012).

**Tabloids-** Refers to the popular newspapers that consider readers as customers and focus more on entertaining and sensational news (Hanusch, 2013).

**Tone-** Alter the audience's perceptions on certain issues in a way of positive, negative, or neutral (Brunken, 2006)

## 1.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter begins with the background of the study, then moves to the problems that need to focus on. The research questions and objectives were proposed based on the existing problems, followed by the importance and scope of the study. The last part was the definitions of the key items.



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